Jail craft of prison officers in post-authoritarian prisons: a comparative research in Belgium and the Netherlands

Pardon, L.R.

Citation

Pardon, L. R. (2026, May 28). *Jail craft of prison officers in post-authoritarian prisons: a comparative research in Belgium and the Netherlands*. *Meijers-reeks*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4304449

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4304449

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Jail Craft of Prison Officers in Post-Authoritarian Prisons

A Comparative Research in Belgium and the Netherlands

Jail Craft of Prison Officers in Post-Authoritarian Prisons

A Comparative Research in Belgium and the Netherlands

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van
de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr. S. de Rijcke,
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
te verdedigen op donderdag 28 mei 2026
klokke 14.30 uur

door

Lorenz Robert Pardon

geboren te Leuven, België

in 1993

Promotoren: Prof.dr. K. Beyens
Prof.dr. M.M. Boone
Co-promotor: Prof.dr. A.-S. Vanhouche

Promotiecommissie: Dr. E.F.J.C. van Ginneken
Prof.dr. P. Nieuwbeerta
Prof.dr. L. Breuls (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, België)
Prof.dr. S. Snacken (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, België)
Dr. A. van den Hurk (Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen (DJI))

Lay-out: AlphaZet prepress, Bodegraven
Printwerk: Ipskamp Printing

© 2026 L.R. Pardon

Behoudens de in of krachtens de Auteurswet van 1912 gestelde uitzonderingen mag niets uit deze uitgave worden verveelvoudigd, opgeslagen in een geautomatiseerd gegevensbestand of openbaar gemaakt, in enige vorm of op enige wijze, hetzij elektronisch, mechanisch, door fotokopieën, opnamen of enig andere manier, zonder voorafgaande schriftelijke toestemming van de auteur.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photoprint, microfilm or any other means without written permission of the author.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IX

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS XI

1 INTRODUCTION 1
- 1.1 Background 1
- 1.2 Rationale for the study 3
- 1.3 Research aims and design 5
- 1.4 Contextualizing the study within the Belgian and Dutch prison systems 8
- 1.5 Overview thesis 13

2 CULTURE, CRAFT AND THE CARCERAL: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING PRISON OFFICERS' WORK 15
- 2.1 Introduction to Prison Officer Culture(s) 15
  - 2.1.1 'Us vs Them': Cultural Solidarity and Exclusionary Logic of Prison Officer Identity 16
  - 2.1.2 The Shifting and Situated Nature of Prison Officer Cultures 19
- 2.2 The craft of 'jailing' 21
  - 2.2.1 The Moral, Relational, and Embodied Dimensions of Jail Craft 21
  - 2.2.2 Professionalism and the Relational Core of Prison Work 23
  - 2.2.3 The Four Pillars of Prison Legitimacy 25
  - 2.2.4 Interpreting the Rules: Discretion as a Core Competency 26
- 2.3 The Accursed Craft: The Burden of Carceral Work 28
  - 2.3.1 Contamination and Stigma in Penal Labour 29
  - 2.3.2 Frontstage Discipline: The Choreography of Emotion in Jail Craft 31
- 2.4 Navigating Carceral Space 33
  - 2.4.1 Spatial Dimensions of the Prison Officer Workplace 33
  - 2.4.2 Imagined Carceral Space 35
  - 2.4.3 The Three Dimensions of Proximity: Spatial, Relational, Experiential 37
  - 2.4.4 Work, Role, and Field: Embeddedness of Prison Officers 38
- 2.5 Chapter conclusion 39

3 METHODOLOGY 43
- 3.1 The Three Anchors of Critical Realist Thought 44
- 3.2 Research design 46
  - 3.2.1 Ethnographic comparative research 46

3.2.2 Preparation of the study 47
3.2.3 Gaining access to the field 48
A. Prison A 51
B. Prison B 53
C. Prison C 56
D. Prison D 58
3.2.4 The practice of data collection 60
A. Ethnography in different carceral places 60
B. Observations of actors and spaces 63
C. Semi-structured interviews 65
D. Document analysis 66
E. Positionality 67
3.2.5 Data-analysis 69
3.2.6 Ethics in prison research 70
A. Informed Consent 70
B. Confidentiality 72
C. Dilemmas and reflections 73

4 Differentiated Prison Officer Work 83
4.1 Prison Officer Roles Compared 83
4.1.1 Custodial Roles in Belgium 83
4.1.2 Custodial Roles in the Netherlands 87
4.1.3 Custodial Roles Compared 92
4.2 Differentiation in Practice 93
4.2.1 From Unified Roles to Functional Separation 94
4.2.2 Regime Logics and the security mindset 97
4.3 Chapter Conclusion 102

5 Thinking, Feeling, Doing: Beyond the Analysis of Prison Officer Roles 105
5.1 The Collapse of Collective Identity Among Belgian Prison Officers 107
5.2 Environmental Relief and Occupational Reframing 109
5.3 Navigating the Architecture of Order 112
5.4 Institutional Contexts, Emotional Coping, and Officer Solidarity in Dutch Prisons 116
5.5 Prison Officer Participation in Promotion and Demotion 121
5.5.1 Inside the Multidisciplinary Team: Who’s at the table? 121
5.5.2 The Six-Week Penal Clock: Soft Power and Temporal Orientation 124
5.6 Chapter conclusion 127

6 Between Us and Them: The Texture of (Dis)connected Space 129
6.1 Proximity and the Architecture of Separation 130
6.1.1 Working Alone, Feeling Apart (Belgian Prison A) 130
6.1.2 Fixed Distance: Separation as Structure (SO^{NL}) 134

6.2 Proximity and Presence: The Weight of Nearness 137
  6.2.1 Relational Order in Spaces Without Separation (PO^{BE}s Prison B) 137
  6.2.2 Tensions and Strategies in Shared Spaces (PO^{NL} Prisons C& D) 141
6.3 Conclusion: Proximity, Authority, and Relational Order 146

7 GENERAL CONCLUSIONS 149
7.1 Research aims and design 149
  7.2 Craft, Culture, and Context: Reconnecting Findings 151
  7.2.1 Research Question One 151
  7.2.2 Research Question Two 153
  7.2.3 Research Question Three 154
7.3 Theoretical Contributions 156
  7.3.1 From Craft to Craft Access: Reframing Skill as a Structurally Mediated Possibility 156
  7.3.2 Proximity as an institutional condition 157
  7.3.3 Institutional Stickiness 158
7.4 Future Research and Policy Directions 159
  7.4.1 Comparative Lessons: Cohesion and Differentiation 159
  7.4.2 Future Research 160
  7.4.3 Reflection on the here and now 160
7.5 Methodological Reflections and Limitations 162

REFERENCES 165

APPENDIX 181

SAMENVATTING (SUMMARY IN DUTCH) 185

CURRICULUM VITAE 189

Acknowledgements

Four years ago, standing on the balcony of the Town Hall on Brussels' Grand Place, I took a deep breath and, with a smile, said the word I had been waiting to say for years: "finally." At that moment, it marked the end of my time as a Criminology student and the start of a new chapter. Now, as I bring this dissertation to a close, I find myself thinking it again, "finally," but this time with an entirely different weight. It carries not relief, but rather a sense of gratitude, pride, and an awareness of how many people, moments, and opportunities have shaped this work.

When I first began my studies, the idea of pursuing a PhD was far from my mind. At that point, I was focused on simply finding my place, exploring subjects, and discovering what I cared about. It was during this period that I stumbled into a field that would change my path: penology. Until then, the carceral world was something distant, something I encountered in books or headlines, but never up close.

That changed when I joined a research project conducted jointly by the VUB and NICC on prison climate and digitalisation in Belgian prisons. Walking through prison gates for the first time and witnessing daily life behind the walls brought into focus the everyday realities that quietly unfold there. And I would like to thank Anouk Mertens, Luc Robert and Eric Maes for that opportunity.

That first encounter planted the seed for what would grow into this thesis, but it also led me to someone who would play a pivotal role in my academic path: Professor Kristel Beyens. She first guided me through my master's thesis and later invited me to embark on the comparative study between Belgium and the Netherlands. Kristel has been more than a supervisor; she has been a mentor and a source of inspiration throughout the highs and lows of this research. She saw possibilities in me long before I could see them myself, and her trust, intellectual guidance, and generosity of spirit have shaped both this work and my growth as a researcher. For all of this, and much more, I am deeply grateful.

My other supervisor, Professor Miranda Boone, and co-supervisor, Professor An-Sofie Vanhouche, have been invaluable in this process. Their critical perspectives, thoughtful questions, and steady encouragement helped shape not just this thesis, but the way I think about doing research. They challenged me when needed, supported me when I felt stuck, and always treated me as a colleague in the making.

This research was never a solitary effort. I was fortunate to share the process with colleagues whose sharp minds and good humour made even challenging moments lighter. In moments of doubt, your encouragement reminded me why this work mattered, in moments of success, you were the first to celebrate alongside me. Sharing this final stage with someone navigating the same process at the same time helped to alleviate the pressures of completing a PhD. I am particularly grateful in this regard to my colleague and close friend, Dr Elias Woodbridge.

I owe thanks as well to the Belgian and Dutch prison services, DG EPI and DJI, for granting me access to conduct this research. I am particularly grateful to Annelies Jorna and Arie van den Hurk of the Dutch Prison Service for taking the access request under their wing and steering it through the complex process of approval. Without their commitment, this research would never have moved beyond an idea on paper.

The four institutions that opened their doors to me deserve special mention. The governors who granted me entry, the prison officers who allowed me to follow them through their day, and who shared their thoughts and experiences during their work, coffee breaks or in passing moments, all contributed to the heart of this research. Allowing me to witness the interactions that take place behind those walls is not taken lightly. This dissertation would not exist without their cooperation.

And then there are the people outside the prison walls who made this possible. To my parents, who have always been my first source of encouragement, thank you for reminding me that no goal is too ambitious if you approach it with dedication. To my brother and sister, who kept me laughing and grounded when academic life felt too heavy, your support means more than you know. To my friends, thank you for the patient listening, and the celebrations along the way. And to my partner, Marie, who has walked beside me through the highs and lows of this process: Your belief in me never wavered, even when my own did.

So, here I am, at the end of another chapter, standing, this time metaphorically, on that balcony. And once again, I can say, with joy, pride and no small amount of gratitude: finally.

List of Abbreviations

DG EPI	Directoraat-Generaal Justitiële Inrichtingen (Belgian prison service)
DJI	Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen (Dutch prison service)
PO(s)	Prison Officer(s)
PBA/PO$^{\mathrm{BE}}$	Penitentiair Bewakingsassistent (Belgian prison officer)
PIW/PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Penitentiair Inrichtingswerker (Dutch unit prison officer)
BEWA/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Complexbeveiliger (Dutch security prison officer)
ZVG/IMP	Zelfstandig Verplaatsen Gedetineerden/Independent Movement Detainees (preferred abbreviation throughout the text)
GVM/ESRD	Gedetineerden met een Vlucht-/Maartschappelijk risico/ Escape and/or Societal Risk Detainees (preferred abbreviation throughout the text)
P&D	Systeem van Promoveren en Degraderen (Promotion and Demotion)
MDO	Multidisciplinair overleg (multidisciplinary team)
PI	penitentiary institutions

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

It is widely acknowledged that both the relationships between prison officer and incarcerated individuals and staff professionalism are central to both the experience and functioning of prison life (Home Office, 1984; Liebling, 2011). This recognition highlights the pivotal role played by prison officers (POs) in shaping the everyday realities of the custodial environment. POs are not merely agents of control but are also key actors in maintaining institutional order through relational means. One concept that captures this dual function is dynamic security – a term introduced by Dunbar (1985) to describe a model of prison security based not only on physical infrastructure and surveillance, but also on consistent, constructive staff-prisoner interactions.

From this perspective, engagement with incarcerated persons is not peripheral to prison security but lies at its very core. The concept of *dynamic security* refers to a model in which institutional security is maintained through the combination of an active, purposeful regime and the cultivation of constructive staff-prisoner relationships. It emphasizes the importance of consistent, respectful communication and meaningful presence on the wings. Marshall (1997) underscores the significance of such interactions, arguing that they contribute not only to order and compliance, but also to a more legitimate and humane custodial environment. However, the implementation of dynamic security is not without tension. It requires a shift away from purely instrumental or punitive conceptions of the prison officer roles, and toward a more relational, engaged, and emotionally intelligent form of prison work. One that is often undermined by resource constraints, managerialist pressures, and persistent cultural divisions within prison staff hierarchies.

Morgan (1992) argues that the stability of a prison regime depends on maintaining a delicate equilibrium between four core functions: custody, order, care, and justice. In recent decades, the expectations placed upon prison officers in relation to these elements have become increasingly complex, shaped by both shifting policy agendas and evolving operational demands. This complexity reflects a broader transformation in penal governance, wherein traditional security functions are progressively integrated with human service responsibilities. As King (2009) observes, this shift acknowledges the dual role of prison officers as both agents of control and facilitators of care. However, this expanded role is far from unproblematic. It places officers at the intersection of often conflicting mandates, requiring them to navigate a terrain marked by emotional strain, ethical ambiguity, and institutional constraint. Numerous studies have highlighted how this convergence of roles intensifies the emotional labour required of prison officers, complicates their professional identities, and exposes them to heightened risks of stress, burnout, and moral fatigue (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Nylander Lindberg & Bruhn, 2011; Tournel, 2015). These developments call into question not only the sustainability of current staffing models, but also the institutional capacity to support officers tasked with fulfilling such diverse and demanding responsibilities.

Building on this complexity, the everyday practice of prison work relies heavily on what has been termed jail craft – a form of occupational expertise rooted in experiential knowledge, practical intuition, and culturally embedded skills (Crewe et al., 2015; Garrihy, 2020;2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Peacock et al., 2017). Far from being reducible to formal training or policy directives, jail craft reflects the informal and often improvised ways in which prison officers navigate the moral, emotional, and relational demands of their environment. It encompasses the subtle capacity to read situations, interpret behaviour, maintain authority without escalation, and strike a workable balance between enforcement and empathy. As Lipsky's (1980) concept of the *street-level bureaucrat* suggests, prison officers operate at the interface between institutional policy and lived practice. In doing so, they exercise considerable discretion in how rules are interpreted, how order is maintained, and how interpersonal dynamics unfold on the wings (Lin, 2000). Their interactions with incarcerated individuals do not merely implement policy – they actively shape its meaning and effects on the ground. As such, prison officers hold significant power to either reinforce or subvert the normative aims of the institution, including its commitments to discipline, rehabilitation, and justice (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). Recognizing the centrality of jail craft thus foregrounds the embodied, situated, and often invisible labour through which prison order is maintained, or contested, on a daily basis.

Despite their importance to the functioning of penal institutions, prison officers remain strikingly underrepresented in international comparative penological research. While some scholarly attention has been directed toward the role of officers in Scandinavian contexts (Bruhn et al., 2017; Kolind et al., 2015) and in comparative studies between Anglophone and Nordic models (Horowitz et al., 2021; Pratt, 2008; Pratt & Eriksson, 2013), systematic analyses that extend beyond these dominant geographies remain scarce. This lacuna reflects a broader pattern within prison ethnographies, wherein studies on the topic are scarce and non-Anglophone perspectives are frequently marginalized or rendered peripheral to theoretical development (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012). The persistent divergence between Anglophone and continental European penal traditions underscores the urgency of expanding the comparative frame. The notion of prison officers as the "invisible ghosts of penality" (Liebling, 2000: p.337) captures their paradoxical presence: central to the functioning of prison life yet overlooked in broader academic and policy discourse (Garrihy, 2020). This research seeks to challenge that invisibility by offering a grounded, comparative analysis of prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands, two jurisdictions currently undergoing significant transformations in correctional policy and practice. By bringing these contexts into conversation, the study contributes to a more pluralized understanding of prison work, institutional logics, and the lived realities of penal governance.

1.2 Rationale for the study

The relevance of this research lies in the broader transformation of penal power within prison systems towards post-authoritarian carceral institutions (van Zyl Smit & Snacken, 2009). These systems are characterised by a diminishment of pure coercive authority, the relocation and dispersal of power, and the deferral of power through governing at a distance (Attrill & Liell, 2007; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2011). In Belgium and the Netherlands, such transformations are reflected in the introduction of rights for incarcerated persons (Daems, 2020; Laemers et al., 2001; Snacken, 2015), the expanded integration of social workers and psychologists in providing guidance during detention and post-release (Hanrath et al., 2019; Polfliet, 2015), the launch of the digital platform PrisonCloud for incarcerated persons in Belgium (Beyens & Geerts, 2024; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020), the promotion & demotion system in the Netherlands (Boone, 2012; Ginneken, 2018; Elbers, 2024) and the shift of the prison officer (PO) role from that of a traditional warden to a more socially engaged function, shaped by an increasingly complex and demanding prison population (Beyens et al., 2021; Gravestijn et al., 2018; Kommer, 1991; Tournel, 2015). How the redistribution of power reshapes the position and role of prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands, and how these are enacted and experienced within the evolving dynamics of post-authoritarian prison contexts, remains insufficiently understood. Within this shifting institutional landscape, only limited ethnographic research has been conducted on the role of prison officers in both countries, with few studies placing them at the centre of analysis, notably those by Kommer (1991), Tournel (2015) and van Dijk (2023).

Policy reforms in the last decade in both jurisdictions further underscore the need for such inquiry. In Belgium, the enactment of the Penitentiary Act (March 23, 2019) has introduced substantial reforms to the organisation of penitentiary services and the status of prison officers. Specifically, the Act brings about significant changes in several key areas, including the training protocols (Art. 11), job descriptions (Art. 13), and overall organizational structure of prison officers (Title IV). Moreover, it addresses the issue of minimum service requirements during officers' strikes (Art.15-20), ensuring that essential functions within the penitentiary system continue to operate even in the face of labour disruptions.

A particularly notable aspect of the Belgian Penitentiary Act is its recognition of the demanding nature of the work performed by Belgian POs (PO^{BE}). The Act acknowledges that their roles require a high level of skill and expertise, reflecting the complexity and intensity of their responsibilities. This acknowledgment aligns with the broader objectives of imprisonment, which were originally outlined in the 2005 Prison Act. These objectives include not only the maintenance of security and order within the prison but also the critical goal of facilitating prisoner reintegration into society. However, a significant challenge identified by the Act is the existing division of institutional powers within the Belgian prison system. This division delineates a separation between the roles focused on security and control and those centred on rehabilitative and care functions. As a result, while Belgian POs are able to employ dynamic security practices, sustained, constructive interaction with incarcerated persons that supports safety and order, they are nonetheless constrained in their capacity to participate more fully in reintegrative and social programmes. This structural separation limits their direct involvement in initiatives that are essential for preparing incarcerated persons for successful reintegration into society.

In contrast, the situation in the Netherlands offers a different perspective. Dutch prison officers, referred to as '*Penitentiaire Inrichtingswerkers*' (PIWers, or Dutch Prison Officers, (PO^{NL}s)), have a more integrated role within the prison system. These officers are directly involved in engaging with incarcerated persons and participate in dynamic security practices, often described as 'warm' custody (Beyens, 2019; Breuls, 2016; Vanhouche et al., 2021). This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining positive relationships and interactions between staff and incarcerated persons, which is believed to support the reintegration process. The Dutch model seems to promote a more holistic relational approach to correctional work, where the focus is not solely on maintaining security but also on fostering an environment conducive to rehabilitation (Beyens & Boone, 2013; Kruttschnitt & Dirkzwager, 2011; Liebling et al., 2021).

Additionally, within the Dutch prison system, there is a distinction between PO^{NL}s and another category of staff known as '*complexbeveiligers*' or BEWAs (or, security officers (SO^{NL}s)). SO^{NL}s are primarily responsible for static security, which is often characterized as 'cold' custody (Beyens, 2019; Breuls, 2016; Vanhouche et al., 2021). Their role is more focused on ensuring the physical security of the facility and managing high-risk situations. This division of labour within the Dutch system highlights the nuanced approach to prison staffing, where different roles and responsibilities are clearly defined to address various aspects of prison management and incarcerated persons care (Kommer, 2018; van Ginneken & Abbing, 2024).

In addition to structural and cultural conditions, the spatial dimension of prisons remains comparatively underexplored in relation to the practices and experiences of prison officers. Drawing on insights from carceral geography (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015; Moran et al., 2018), existing research shows that prison architecture is not merely a neutral backdrop but an active agent in structuring institutional routines and carceral relationships. Spatial configurations – such as the contrast between panopticon layouts and campus-style designs (Beijersbergen et al., 2014) – mediate visibility, interaction patterns, and officers' sense of control and security. Open, decentralized facilities tend to foster informal dialogue and relational engagement, whereas enclosed and heavily monitored environments may produce distance, strain, and alienation (Jewkes, 2018; Mario et al., 2024). Furthermore, the sensory and affective atmospheres of prisons – lighting, noise, temperature, and movement – affect not only how officers work but how they feel and inhabit their environment (Crewe et al., 2014; Turner & Peters, 2015). In this sense, spatial organization both enables and constrains institutional logics, making the spatial dimension integral to understanding how Belgian and Dutch officers enact their roles in everyday practice.

In summary, this research is driven by a need to critically examine how prison officer roles in Belgium and the Netherlands are shaped, enacted, and experienced within the shifting dynamics of post-authoritarian prison systems. Rather than treating staffing models as fixed or coherent, the study explores how prison officer roles are shaped, constrained, and negotiated within specific institutional settings. By comparing the Dutch and Belgian contexts, the research sheds light on how organisational structures, policy expectations, prison space and day-to-day realities influence staff-prisoner relations, institutional legitimacy, and professional identity. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about the future of prison staffing, the operationalization of care and control, and the significance of frontline prison work in contemporary penal governance.

1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND DESIGN

This study aims to develop a deeper explanatory understanding of the lived experiences of prison officers in Belgian and Dutch prisons by examining how their actions, orientations, and occupational culture are shaped by underlying institutional structures, cultural norms and spatial design. Occupational cultures are treated not as static or purely discursive constructs, but as dynamic social realities emerging from the interplay between structure and agency, between the formal mandates of penal systems and the situated strategies of those who enact them on the ground (Alvesson et al., 2008). The study seeks to address how prison officers in both countries navigate the tensions between care and control, discretion and accountability, emotional labour and institutional rationality. The comparative design provides an opportunity to identify similarities and differences, by comparing how staffing models and institutional configurations may produce distinct outcomes, while remaining attentive to the challenges of "comparing like with like" and avoiding ethnocentric assumptions in cross-national research (Nelken, 2010, p.56). By making visible the often-underacknowledged forces shaping prison officer practice, the study contributes to an internationally relevant understanding of contemporary prison work. It is guided by several research questions aimed at identifying and explaining the structural, relational, cultural, and spatial dimensions of prison officer experiences across jurisdictions.

1. How do structural, cultural, and legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape the construction of prison officers' occupational identities, and how are these perceived by prison officers?

This question seeks to uncover the generative mechanisms – structural (e.g., staffing models, job descriptions), cultural (e.g., shared values, informal norms, role expectations), and legislative (e.g., penal acts, role differentiation, policy frameworks) – that underpin how prison officers come to understand their roles. It invites a layered exploration of how these roles are shaped from above, for example through legislation such as the Belgian Penitentiary Act (2019) and the Dutch Punishment and Protection Act (2021), as well as through formal role differentiation, and how they are perceived from below by prison officers themselves.

2. How do institutional logics and structural conditions in Belgium and the Netherlands shape local prison officers' practices, and how are these embedded in their day-to-day work?

This question examines the interaction between institutional logics and structural conditions (e.g., staff shortages, regime type, role definitions, local prison policy) in shaping core aspects of prison work. Practices of prison officers are not understood as isolated skills, but as contextually situated responses to and constraints imposed by specific institutional environments. The aim is to trace how institutional and structural differences produce distinct styles of prison officer conduct, and how these are experienced, negotiated, and enacted in everyday prison life.

3. In what ways do spatial configurations in Belgian and Dutch prisons influence prison officers' interaction patterns and everyday work practices?

This question examines how the physical layout and architectural design of prisons affect officers' ability to interact with incarcerated persons and with each other. It focuses on how spatial arrangements shape opportunities for contact, observation, and relationship-building, both in terms of physical closeness and the ease of social interaction. It considers how design features, security routines, and institutional policies may facilitate or hinder sustained, constructive interaction, and how these spatial conditions may influence officers' daily practices and professional orientations.

This study draws on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and 76 interviews in four institutions – two in Belgium and two in the Netherlands – to examine the everyday practices and lived experiences of prison officers. The comparative design enables analysis of how different penal logics, staffing structures, and institutional cultures shape officers' behaviours, perceptions, and relationships, while also identifying cross-jurisdictional patterns. Informed by the concept of jail craft, the study situates local practices within broader debates in penology. At a time when European prisons face overcrowding, staff shortages, rising complexity among incarcerated persons, and competing demands for security and rehabilitation, understanding the role of frontline prison staff is urgent (O'Connell & Rogan, 2023; Rogan, 2019; Snacken et al., 2022). Despite their central role in maintaining order, delivering care, and enacting the goals of imprisonment, prison officers remain underexamined in comparative penological research, particularly in continental Europe (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011; Nelken, 2010). This study addresses that gap.

Methodologically, this study is grounded in a critical realist approach, seeking to uncover the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions that shape the observable practices and experiences of prison officers. Ethnography is not simply deployed as a method of data collection but as a lens through which the layered reality of prison working environments can be examined, capturing both surface-level events and being aware of deeper generative factors that produce them. While remaining attentive to participants situated narratives and practices, the analysis moves beyond description to interrogate the institutional, cultural, and spatial structures that constrain or enable action.

Fieldwork is central to this endeavour. Through extended immersion in prison settings, the study traces how seemingly routine interactions are anchored in broader systemic logics. Rather than treating prison officer perspectives as purely subjective accounts, the research situates them within a stratified ontology, where agency and structure are mutually constitutive.

In doing so, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically. It illuminates how prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands enact and make sense of their roles within divergent carceral regimes, and how institutional design, occupational culture, and spatial configuration mediate staff-prisoner relations. Ultimately, the research offers a deeper explanatory understanding of prison officer practice under conditions of penal transformation, speaking not only to academic debates but also to questions of policy and professional development.

1.4 CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY WITHIN THE BELGIAN AND DUTCH PRISON SYSTEMS

Both Belgium and the Netherlands saw their prison populations increase in the 1980s (Beyens et al., 2014). Not only was the Dutch prison system confronted with a shortage of capacity, but they were also faced with severe budget cuts in this period (Kommer, 1991). This gradually translated into a downsizing of detention regimes with fewer activities for incarcerated persons, more hours on cell and the (partial) introduction of multi-person cells (Boone & Moerings, 2008; De Jonge, 2007). Dutch POs that had to work under these circumstances indicated that these measures and the related work pressure limited their possibilities to adequately maintain contacts with prisoners (Moors et al., 2004). From 2005 onwards, the prison population started to decline. In their interpretation of this decline, Boone and Moerings (2008) point to a complex interplay of factors that are mainly related to a changing policy at the level of the police and the Public Prosecution Service, which focuses more on lighter forms of crime, and a changing immigration policy. The 2009-2014 Masterplan (2009) for the Prison System therefore included proposals to reduce capacity by closing several penitentiary institutions. This capacity reduction was continued, partly due to a new austerity assignment, with the implementation of the DJI Masterplan 2013-2018 (2013), which also built on developments that had already been set in motion: further degradation of regimes, intensification of multi-person cell use, downward adjustment of the staffing establishment, closure of penitentiary institutions (PIs), and consequently many departures and changes of staff due to (among other things) job insecurity (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2016). In response to these developments, in 2017 the Dutch House of Representatives received a memorandum, ‘Appellation for Safety’, from the Central Works Council of the Judicial Institutions Department (DJI) on behalf of prison staff, to highlight the effects of the cuts, which are so tangible that safety within the PIs could no longer be guaranteed (Inspectie JenV, 2018). According to the staff, there is understaffing, insufficient personnel, high work pressure, high levels of absenteeism and insufficient time to carry out assignments consistently and to a high standard (Gravesteijn et al., 2018). The executive penitentiary personnel have less opportunity to perform their relational task, including treatment (de Groot, 2019; RSJ, 2019).

While the Netherlands is closing prisons due to a decrease in the prison population, overcrowding in Belgian prisons is a constant source of concern that has dominated and hampered detention policy since the late 1980s (Beyens et al., 1993). Despite the introduction of alternatives to pre-trial detention and the custodial sentence, the partial or non-execution of prison sentences of up to three years and the execution of prison sentences by electronic surveillance, successive Belgian Ministers of Justice are unable to control the rising prison population. The main explanations are the increasing duration of pre-trial detention and the longer detention periods of convicted prisoners (Beyens, Dirkzwager & Korf, 2014; Beyens & Tubex, 2002; Maes, 2010). Due to persistent overcrowding, cell-sharing is no longer an exceptional measure in Belgium but a structural feature of the prison system. Incarcerated persons have long protested substandard living conditions in Belgian prisons; decades of CPT reporting, ECHR case-law, and national monitoring document persistent overcrowding, dilapidation, and hygiene deficits (Deschuyteneer et al., 2023). Most Belgian prisons date back to the 19th century and are characterised by star-shaped or traditional Ducpétiaux architecture (Tournel, 2015). The living conditions for prisoners are the working conditions for POs. Overcrowding leads to more tensions for incarcerated persons and staff alike and ensuring a dynamic security and good relations with the incarcerated persons became increasingly difficult (Snacken, 2005). The welfare of the incarcerated persons is linked to the welfare of POs. Continuous tensions between incarcerated persons and POs regularly lead to strikes, while guidance or treatment of the prison population leaves much to be desired.

The Belgian Prison Act of 2005 emphasizes the protection of incarcerated persons' dignity (Art. 5), the normalization of regimes (Art. 43; 53-70), and the implementation of dynamic security (Art. 105), all with a view to facilitating reintegration (Art. 9). However, these normative ambitions often clash with the prevailing occupational culture of Belgian prison officers, which remains largely rooted in a security-oriented ethos (Tournel, 2015). In response to persistent national and international criticism, the 2019 Penitentiary Act introduced reforms aimed at redefining the professional role of prison officers. It acknowledged the complexity and skill involved in prison work (Beyens et al., 2021) and proposed changes in training, task differentiation, and service continuity during strikes (Beyens, 2019; Daems, 2020b).

Notably, the 2019 Act drew inspiration from the Dutch prison officer model. In the Netherlands, a clearer distinction is made between prison officers, prison officers (PO^{NL})involved in daily engagement, mentoring and dynamic security, and prison officers (SO^{NL}) focused on static security (Beyens, et al., 2021; Kommer, 2018; van Ginneken & Abbing, 2024). In Belgium, by contrast, the separation of institutional powers between security-oriented prison officers and care professionals means that, although Belgian POs may engage in elements of dynamic security, their formal remit places less emphasis on sustained reintegrative work, with many such responsibilities allocated to external professionals (Tournel, 2015).

However, it remains uncertain how the envisioned system will, or can, be meaningfully implemented within the Belgian context, given the complexities of Belgium's federal state structure, the persistence of long-standing penal traditions, and the deeply embedded occupational cultures of its prison officers (Beyens, 2019; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, 2023). Belgium's gradual convergence toward elements of the Dutch model thus invites a critical examination of the underlying differences and convergences between the two national penitentiary systems. As previously noted, Belgian prisoners held in PI Tilburg expressed appreciation for the Dutch approach to prison officer conduct, suggesting its perceived relational quality and responsiveness (Beyens & Boone, 2013). Similarly, Liebling et al. (2020) identified the 'present-oriented' stance of Dutch officers in PI Norgerhaven as one of their defining strengths – an orientation that manifests in equal, respectful communication, attentiveness to everyday interpersonal dynamics, and a focus on engaging with incarcerated individuals in the immediacy of the here and now.

At first sight, the Dutch prison context seems to portray a much more positive image compared to the Belgian prison context, such as a decreasing prison population and no overcrowding, no strikes or strong unions who impede the introduction of incarcerated persons' rights, better staff interactions and a more positive atmosphere in prison in general (Beyens & Boone, 2013; Liebling et al., 2020). It should be noted however that the differentiation of functions also poses practical problems for the Dutch prison service. For certain positions, the labour market is so tight that it is not always possible to meet the need for POs in time, by means of recruitment. For certain function groups, it is possible to cooperate with external parties to provide trained staff at short notice (e.g. security officers). But for the function group of PO^{NL}, temporarily hiring external staff is not an option. In that case, (experienced) facility guards are called in to fill in at the living units (Algemene Rekenhof, 2019; DPMO, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2018). The question then arises as to what extent these SO^{NL} have the necessary competences that are required of PO^{NL}. Furthermore, the Dutch prison context has been subject to change and social turmoil as well.

With the introduction of the Sentencing and Protection Law (2021), the Dutch prison system increasingly emphasizes future-oriented goals, such as rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism. This legal shift builds on the promotion-demotion system introduced in 2014, where incarcerated persons' (un)desirable behaviour is systematically assessed and linked to internal and external freedoms (Boone, 2021; Elbers, 2024; Struijk, 2020). As a result, prison officers are expected to play a more active role in shaping future outcomes through their behavioural evaluations and motivational engagement.

However, this growing reliance on formal assessment mechanisms introduces new tensions into prison officers' work. As Beyens and Boone (2013, p.197) already asked during their study of PI Tilburg, how compatible is the Dutch officer's strength – working relationally in the 'here and now' – with a system that increasingly demands predictive judgement?

While these tensions are partly rooted in the future-oriented logic of the law, other scholars (Kommer, 2018; van Kleef, 2019) point to a parallel development: the rise of registration and administrative accountability in prison work. This shift reflects a broader managerial trend toward evidencing performance, which may sideline the interpersonal and relational aspects of officer-prisoner interaction. Although not inherently driven by future-oriented goals, this administrative emphasis reinforces a mode of working where formal documentation may begin to displace embodied knowledge and human connection.

Since the 1970s, Dutch executive penitentiary staff, especially prison officers (known as "PO^{NL}"), have been required not only to undertake security tasks but also to promote a positive atmosphere and a healthy living environment (Molleman, 2021). Prison officers are expected to achieve this through "bejegening" – which means interacting with prisoners in a respectful, understanding, and equitable manner, based on a negotiation-based approach (Zwezerijnen, 1972). Over the years, this responsibility has grown, with the consequence that the degree of humane execution of custodial sentences and measures, and the minimization of detention-related harm, heavily depends on how well prison officers dedicate themselves to their duties (Grapendaal et al., 1985; Kommer, 1991). During the 1980s, the Dutch prison system faced both a shortage of capacity and significant budget cuts (Kommer, 1991). This gradually led to more austere detention regimes, with fewer activities for incarcerated persons, more time spent in cells, and the (partial) introduction of shared cells (Boone & Moerings, 2008; De Jonge, 2007). The executive penitentiary staff working under these conditions reported that these austerity measures and the associated workload limited their ability to maintain adequate contact with incarcerated persons (Moors et al., 2004).

The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) (2017) and the Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles (RSJ) (2019) have also raised alarms about the high workload for executive penitentiary staff. They report that the workload, which has been high for years, has increased further due to additional tasks, including behavioural assessments under the promote-demote system. Some authors note that the increased focus on recording behaviour has reduced the attention given to the humane side of the work (Kommer, 2018; van Kleef, 2019). The cited safety issues are not only due to staff shortages but also to the complex prison population, characterized by a high degree of psychosocial problems (den Bak et al., 2018; Inspectie JenV, 2018; RSJ, 2019). Due to the combination of a changing prison population and reduced staffing, higher demands are placed on staff, requiring additional guidance and training (Gravesteijn et al., 2018). To address staff shortages, DJI launched a large nationwide recruitment campaign in 2017, alongside regular recruitment efforts, to quickly resolve the shortage of executive penitentiary staff. Despite the tight labour market, this resulted in over 1,100 new employees in the following two years, stabilizing the situation somewhat (DPMO, 2019).

However, for certain positions, the labour market is so tight that recruitment alone cannot always meet the demand for executive penitentiary staff in a timely manner. For some roles, cooperation with external providers allows for rapid staffing solutions (e.g., for static security roles), but such flexibility does not apply to the prison officer function. In practice, this has led to experienced security staff being temporarily deployed on living units, where direct interaction with incarcerated persons is required (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2018; DPMO, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2018).

This functional shift raises concerns about whether these staff members possess the necessary competencies to fulfil the relational and communicative demands of the prison officer role. Previous research has underscored the importance of these skills: earlier in this text, reference was made to the 'present-focused' orientation of Dutch prison officers (Liebling et al., 2020). Such qualities were similarly appreciated by Belgian prisoners during their stay in the Tilburg prison under Dutch custody (Beyens & Boone, 2013). These findings suggest that substituting trained prison officers with staff from more security-oriented backgrounds may risk undermining this essential relational dimension of prison work.

However, with the "Sentencing and Protection Act" (2021), the focus is less on the "here and now" and more on future goals. This law introduces the idea that an incarcerated persons behaviour will have consequences for detention phasing and conditional release (Boone, 2021; Elbers, 2024; Struijk, 2020). As a result, motivating interactions and judgments by executive penitentiary staff are instrumentalized to achieve future goals as set out in the law (Molleman, 2021). This raises the question of how this evolution aligns with the skills of prison officers to work in the "here and now". To what extent is what prison officers excel at today, working in the immediacy in a humane and equitable manner, compatible with the growing importance of future goals? How do they experience this shift in roles? What does it mean for their interactions with incarcerated persons when executive staff are expected to make efforts to change their future behaviour? And what does this mean for recruitment and training needs?

To address current and future developments, DJI views investing in "craftsmanship" and "sustainable employability" of executive penitentiary staff as a crucial prerequisite, as stated in the strategic personnel plan DJI 2019-

2025, noting that there is no guarantee that the work will look the same in five years as it does now (DPMO, 2019). Specifically, craftsmanship refers to staff skills, including guiding/interacting with incarcerated persons, facilitating a humane and resocializing detention environment, and ensuring safety through relational security (Kommer, 2018). In 2018, DJI implemented this with the "craftsmanship" program under the agreement "Working on a Solid Personnel Policy". This program was designed to enable prisons to offer staff job-specific training. However, due to previously mentioned capacity problems and work pressure, there is not always the opportunity to participate in these training sessions (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2018; Inspectie JenV, 2018; RSJ, 2019).

Taken together, these developments illustrate how the Belgian and Dutch prison systems have evolved under distinct structural pressures, policy trajectories, and occupational orientations. Although both jurisdictions confront similar challenges, balancing security with care, managing increasingly complex prison populations, and sustaining adequate staffing, their institutional responses and organisational arrangements differ in significant respects. Examining how these systemic contexts influence the everyday practices, role perceptions, and professional identities of prison officers forms the core concern of this thesis. The subsequent chapters build on this comparative foundation to address the research questions, progressing from the theoretical framework and methodological design to the presentation and analysis of the empirical findings.

1.5 Overview thesis

This dissertation is structured around five core chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework, drawing on key notions surrounding jail craft, such as occupational culture, dirty work, emotional labour, authority, discretion, role embeddedness and proximity. It sets the theoretical lens through which the experiences and practices of prison officers are interpreted.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology. It explains the comparative ethnographic approach, the critical realist lens, the rationale behind site selection, and the process of data collection and analysis. The chapter also reflects on the challenges and ethical considerations of conducting research in carceral settings.

Chapter 4 examines how legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape prison officers' roles, and how officers themselves interpret and enact these roles in daily practice.

Chapter 5 focuses on the mechanisms within each institution that reproduce or challenge existing professional orientations. It examines how officers embody their roles, manage moral ambivalence, and sustain a sense of professional purpose in light of institutional expectations.

Chapter 6 analyses how interactions are shaped within institutional settings. It conceptualizes proximity not just as spatial closeness, but as a relational condition influenced by the institution's material lay-out and the staffs' position within it. It shows how this affects their ability to enact authority, maintain care, and sustain professional identity. The comparison reveals how spatial and organizational differences in Belgian and Dutch prisons enable or constrain relational practice.

Together, these chapters aim to provide an in-depth, comparative understanding of contemporary prison officer work in Belgium and the Netherlands, with a view to both empirical insight and theoretical development.

2 Culture, craft and the carceral: Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Prison Officers' work

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by a wide range of literature to shed light on the work of prison officers. This chapter introduces the theories and concepts relevant to the study. The chapter aims to succinctly synthesize various theories and concepts – prison officer occupational culture, emotional labour, dirty work, embedded work role perspective and proximity – to highlight their significance in addressing the research objectives. The review itself is presented in five distinct, but interrelated, sections. The first examines the occupational culture(s) of prison officers, focusing specifically on its characteristics, norms and the factors that shape and define it. The second section surveys the concept of 'jail craft', making important connections between relationships in prison, the interconnection of prison roles and the skilful use of discretion. The third section examines the performative nature of the prison environment and the embodiment of occupational culture through the concepts of 'emotional labour' and 'dirty work'. The fourth section draws from the 'embedded work role perspective', asserting that prison officers are both embedded in their working roles and within specific penal fields, with each significantly influencing their professional orientation. The fifth and final section on 'carceral space' and its relevance to the study is presented in two parts. The first offers an overview of aesthetic components and the relationship with the lived experience of carceral space. The second considers the role of the intangible within the prison environment through prison metaphors, with a major focus on the concept of proximity.

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO PRISON OFFICER CULTURE(S)

Few definitions clearly outline what the occupational culture of prison officers entails or how it develops. Terms like "guard subculture", "staff culture", "prison officer culture" and "prison officer workplace culture" are used in some prison studies, but their meanings vary, ranging from referring to staff or officers within a single prison to encompassing general patterns across the entire occupation (Crawley, 2004a; Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2023; Kauffman1988; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Nylander, 2011; Poole & Regoli, 1981; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022; Tournel, 2015).

An occupational culture can be defined as a socially constructed pattern of shared thinking, feeling, and behaviour that emerges within a specific occupation (Manning, 2007). Yet, early scholarship on prison officers' occupational culture frequently referenced or aligned itself with research on police culture, given the notable parallels in street-level bureaucracy, in-and out-group dynamics, application of authority, and group norms across both occupations (Farkas, 1997; Farkas & Manning, 1997; Liebling, 2000; Poole & Regoli, 1981). While police and prison officers share certain occupational cultural aspects, significant differences exist in their experiences and working environments. Unlike police officers, prison officers maintain continuous contact with the individuals under their supervision, and they wield considerable direct power over detained persons, who are no longer free citizens. Moreover, prison officers operate within "total institutions" (Goffman, 1961), secluded from public scrutiny, which impacts both their accountability and public perception of their occupation (Liebling, Price, and Shefer, 2011). This sense of occupational distinctiveness shapes prison officer identities, fostering adherence to their own set of norms, outlooks, and behavioural codes (Garrihy, 2023; Morrison & Maycock, 2021; Scott, 2008).

In her research on occupational culture of prison officers, Crawley (2004a, p.35) proposed that prison officer culture therefor encompasses 'the values, beliefs, attitudes, customs and working practices that influence the quality of the regime, the "tone" of the prison, and the consequent relationships between prison officers and incarcerated persons, and between officers themselves'. Thus, at the operational level, the occupational cultures of prison officers are broadly characterized by insularity, group solidarity, social isolation, pragmatism, pessimism, suspicion, cynicism, conservatism, machismo, distance from senior management, desensitization, and a distinctive sense of humour (Arnold, Liebling and Tait, 2007; Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2023; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling, Price and Shefer, 2011; Tournel, 2015). These traditional depictions of prison officer occupational cultures are predominantly negative, as they are mostly characterized by an 'Us versus Them' mentality that underlie many of the traits (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2023; Halsey & Deegan, 2017; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011; Maculan & Rodelli, 2022; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023; Sim, 2008; Tournel, 2015).

2.1.1 'Us vs Them': Cultural Solidarity and Exclusionary Logic of Prison Officer Identity

The 'Us versus Them' mechanism appears to be characteristic for the process of the occupational prison officer identity construction and relies on cultural aspects of mutual solidarity and exclusion of everybody who thinks differently (Liebling, 2007). Some scholars argue that the disproportionate and negative image of officers that exists in the minds of others contributes to the creation of a rigid and self-centred occupational culture (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011). Other scholars argue that prison officers' distance themselves from incarcerated persons as a form of coping with the difficulties of the job and as a protection of the self against contamination (Garrihy, 2018; Tournel, 2015).

These experiences are consolidated through strong occupational narratives that emphasize the distinctiveness and difficulty of prison work. Such narratives not only affirm the uniqueness of the occupation but are also used to justify a tight knit, solidaristic culture that reinforces internal cohesion (Garrihy, 2023; Higgins et al., 2022; Nylander, 2011; Poole & Regoli, 1981; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023; Tournel, 2015). Their culture fosters a sense of insularity – officers form a close community marked by suspicion toward outsiders. In high-risk settings, mutual trust and support are essential for both physical safety and emotional resilience (Arnold, Liebling, & Tait, 2007; Crawley, 2004a), and this interdependence strengthens the in-group mentality (Garrihy; 2023; Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011; Maculan & Rodelli, 2022).

The demanding and often misunderstood nature of their work contributes to social isolation beyond the prison walls. Officers frequently feel that outsiders – including family and friends – cannot fully comprehend the realities of their job (Crawley, 2004a). These dynamics bind members together by defining an ‘other’, fostering unity through exclusion. Such mechanisms are central to the formation and maintenance of occupational cultures and subcultures. The act of bonding with peers while distancing from outsiders creates patterns of inclusion and exclusion that shape not only professional identity but also social experience. Within the carceral setting, these dynamics intensify, reinforcing occupational boundaries and a protective sense of camaraderie among officers, while deepening the ‘Us versus Them’ divide (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2023; Kauffman, 1988; Tournel, 2015).

In the face of daily challenges, officers adopt a pragmatic approach to their duties, focusing on practical solutions and the immediate necessity of maintaining order and safety (Kauffman, 1988; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023; Tournel, 2015). Officers frequently exhibit a pessimistic outlook and a high level of suspiciousness. These attitudes stem from their constant exposure to potential threats and the adversarial nature of their work environment (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Farkas & Manning, 1997). A pervasive sense of cynicism is common, as officers feel underappreciated and misunderstood by management, the media, and the public. This cynicism can impact their engagement and motivation (Farkas & Manning, 1997). Continuous exposure to violence, trauma, and other harsh realities of prison life leads to emotional desensitization. This coping mechanism helps officers manage the psychological toll of their work (Garrihy, 2021; Kauffman, 1988). Humour is a critical tool for coping with stress and maintaining morale. It serves to defuse tension and build camaraderie among officers (Nielsen, 2011). The prison environment often reinforces traditional notions of masculinity. Machismo is prevalent, influencing interactions and behaviours among male officers (Compton & Brandhorst, 2021; Griffin, Armstrong, & Hepburn, 2005; Seymour, 2018). The culture can be particularly challenging for female officers, who must navigate a male-dominated environment while establishing their authority and competence (Crawley, 2004a).

These characteristics delineate the occupational cultures of prison officers, alongside the expressed norms that serve as implicit and explicit guidelines governing their conduct. Referred to as the "prison officer code" (Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011, p.161), these norms encompass a range of behaviours, including aiding distressed officers, refraining from smuggling drugs for prisoners, maintaining solidarity among colleagues against 'outsiders', never 'rat out' other officers, never get to close to incarcerated persons and always have your colleagues back (Arnold, Liebling, & Tait, 2007; Farkas, 1997; Kauffman, 1988; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, 2023). These norms, synthesized from various studies, provide a clear illustration of expected behaviour for prison officers. A lot of norms claim mutual solidarity among officers. Internal solidarity is emphasized in the face of physical, social and emotional isolation from the outside world (Tracy, 2004). In-group solidarity is strong when considerable time is spent together and being dependent on one another to learn how to be a prison officer (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Eriksson, 2021). This solidarity ensures that prison officers can rely on colleagues while in a tight spot and trust that secrecy during internal and external investigations will be maintained. Importantly, while these norms are generally upheld, examples from studies also highlight instances where they are contravened. Those who do not abide by the unwritten rules are excluded (Kauffman, 1988; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, Maesschalk & Daems, 2021). Within the 'Us versus Them' mechanism, social exclusion is the most prevalent and effective sanction used by the in-group to coerce the conformity of other prison officers (Garrihy, 2021). This strategy is effective because of the inherent sense of loneliness it induces and the emotional feeling of not being connected to others (Aytac, 2015). This places officers in the difficult position of choosing between adhering to the norm or doing what they believe is right (van Dijk, 2023). Officers may feel pressured or intimidated into following cultural norms. In fact, some officers report experiencing more stress from interactions with their colleagues than with prisoners (Crawley & Crawley, 2008, p. 145). In fear of being excluded by their colleagues, dissenting prison officers may conceal their true opinion, a phenomenon that was described by Taylor (1982, p.311) as the 'spiral of silence'. Prison officers however underestimate the degree to which other officers share their beliefs and sentiments. The discrepancies between prison officers' adherence to the avowed norms and the extent to which their own beliefs are shared by others can be accounted for by 'pluralistic ignorance'. According to Miller and McFarland (1987, p.298) pluralistic ignorance refers to "the situation in which virtually all members of a group privately reject group norms yet believe that virtually all other group members accept them".

2.1.2 The Shifting and Situated Nature of Prison Officer Cultures

However, occupational cultures among prison officers are neither static nor homogeneous, but rather dynamic and context-dependent (Liebling, 2008). These cultures develop partly as coping mechanisms in response to common workplace challenges, and prisons are a clear reflection of this (Arnold, Liebling, & Tait, 2007; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). Recent scholarship has adopted more nuanced approaches to understanding prison officer culture, highlighting its positive dimensions as well as the variation that exists both within and across national contexts (Beyens & Boone, 2013; Bruhn, Nylander & Lindberg, 2010; De Keyser & Vanhouche, 2019; Kruttschnitt & Dirkzwager, 2011; Lerman, 2013; Liebling et al., 2021; Moran & Turner, 2021). Drawing on extensive research in prisons in England and Wales, Liebling (2004, 2011) conceptualizes the “moral performance” of prisons through three key dimensions of officer culture: their orientation toward relationships, their use of authority, and their level of professionalism (Crewe, Liebling & Hulley, 2015; Crewe & Liebling, 2018; Liebling, 2000). These dimensions reveal a spectrum of cultural styles among officers, ranging from “traditional-resistant” to “traditional-relational” or “traditional-professional.”

Crewe et al. (2011) further refine this typology by distinguishing between negative and positive expressions of traditional culture. The traditional-resistant style is defined by cynicism, pettiness, disrespect, and an emphasis on control, often reinforcing a rigid ‘us versus them’ mentality. In contrast, the traditional-professional approach is characterized by confidence, clear boundaries, vigilance, and competence. Although such traditional cultures may not be overtly empathetic, they can nonetheless provide high levels of safety, fairness, and order. In these settings, incarcerated persons tend to “know where they stand,” trust officers to exercise authority when necessary, and interpret restraint in the use of power as a deliberate and professional choice rather than a sign of weakness or avoidance (Crewe et al., 2011: 109).

Liebling and Kant (2016) later argue that prison staff cultures fall into two ideal types, being the professional-supportive and the resistant-punitive, with the former being often overlooked in prison research. The professional-supportive type is characterized by constructive engagement, ethical conduct, and a measured use of authority, whereas the resistant-punitive type reflects more antagonistic, rigid, and control-oriented attitudes. Although the latter tends to dominate in practice, both cultural forms are essential for understanding the embedded dynamics of prisons. Importantly, even among prisons with similarly negative cultures, substantial differences can be observed. As the authors note, these variations are “numerous and significant” (Liebling & Kant, 2016, p.209).

One particularly illustrative example of how occupational culture becomes internalized is the concept of the security mindset, developed by Schoenfeld and Everly (2022). The authors use this term to describe a dominant occupational orientation in which security is not merely a policy objective, but a deeply embedded way of thinking, acting, and justifying behaviour. Officers routinely invoked "security" – often spontaneously – as the rationale for their decisions, practices, and interpersonal conduct. This mindset functions as a cultural lens that defines what is considered professional, reasonable, or acceptable. Actions such as restricting incarcerated persons movement, avoiding informal conversations, or withholding emotional engagement were framed as necessary for maintaining security, even when institutional policy encouraged relational or rehabilitative goals. Drawing from sociological and Foucauldian understandings of discourse, Schoenfeld and Everly (2022) conceptualize this mindset as a self-reinforcing system of meaning that shapes how officers perceive their role and environment. As such, the security mindset is not simply an individual attitude but a shared occupational logic – one that influences recruitment, peer norms, training, and resistance to change. In their conceptualization, prison officer culture is understood as a set of shared behavioural norms, beliefs, values, and symbols that are reflected in the commonly accepted ways of responding to organizational challenges arising from the prison's mission, structure, and the nature of officers' roles (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). The responses officers develop to both inherent and situational dilemmas of confinement are shaped by the resources available to them – whether material, human, or symbolic.

Prison officer culture is negotiated by officers based on localized establishment occupation norms (Nixon & Woodward, 2024). In the prison context, it functions as a cognitive and emotional lens through which officers interpret and navigate the challenges of their environment, shaping how they understand their role and position within the institution (Garrihy, 2020). These cultures are both developed and sustained over time, reinforcing particular ways of thinking and acting (Nylander, 2011). Frequently, they evolve as coping mechanisms in response to the psychological, physical, and moral challenges inherent in prison work (Arnold, Liebling, & Tait, 2007). A variety of institutional and contextual factors influence the nature of occupational cultures and the identities of individual officers. These include the security level of the facility, leadership style, generational composition of the staff, turnover rates, architectural design, and the prison's historical record of conflict or industrial action. Prisons are often known for their distinctive cultures, and the occupational culture of staff tends to mirror and reproduce these reputational narratives (Garrihy, 2020). Prisons can be infamous for their cultures, and the occupational cultures of the prison officers working there often mirror these reputations. The role of the prison officer has evolved significantly in recent history, bringing with it various stressors and role conflicts that impact job satisfaction and consequently shape prison officers' occupational identities (Castle, 2008; Griffin et al., 2009).

2.2 THE CRAFT OF 'JAILING'

Historically, prison officers have been depicted as 'turnkeys', 'warders', or 'guards' – figures whose primary function was to lock and unlock doors and maintain physical control over incarcerated individuals (Carey, 2000; Morris, 1998; Tournel, 2015). This narrow view, however, no longer captures the complexity of contemporary prison work. Today, prison officers are expected to juggle multiple, often conflicting, responsibilities: they must enforce discipline and security while also contributing to rehabilitation and personal development (Bruhn, Nylander & Lindberg, 2010; Sim, 2008). This dual mandate generates role tension, as officers navigate the fine line between coercive authority and supportive engagement.

In the face of vague or insufficient policy guidance, officers often develop individualized approaches to their duties (Gilbert, 1997). Tims, Derks, and Bakker (2016) describe this adaptive process as 'job crafting', a proactive effort by workers to reshape tasks, relationships, and work meaning. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) similarly argue that job crafting allows individuals to align their work with personal values and styles. In the prison context, this aligns closely with the development of 'jail craft', a term used by Liebling (cited in House of Commons Justice Committee, 2009) to refer to the hard-won skills and strategies that enable officers to operate effectively within the constraints of prison life. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) distinguish three interrelated forms of job crafting: task crafting (altering the nature or scope of tasks), relational crafting (shaping social interactions at work), and cognitive crafting (reframing how one interprets or gives meaning to one's job). These distinctions help clarify the ways in which prison officers individually negotiate the tensions inherent in their dual mandate – balancing the imperative to maintain order and control with the expectation to support rehabilitation and humane treatment (Nowicka-Kostrzewska & Roznowski, 2023). For example, an officer may engage in task crafting by adjusting the level of discretion used in searches or discipline, engage in relational crafting by selectively building rapport with prisoners or colleagues, and apply cognitive crafting by reframing their work as contributing to public safety or personal transformation rather than merely containment.

Despite the constraints of a rigid institutional environment, job crafting remains a vital coping mechanism. It allows officers to assert a degree of autonomy in how they interpret and perform their roles, serving as a buffer against stress and emotional exhaustion while enhancing engagement and job satisfaction.

2.2.1 The Moral, Relational, and Embodied Dimensions of Jail Craft

Jail craft is more than a personal skill set, it is a deeply cultural and collective construct, transmitted across generations of officers and shaped by shared experiences, informal codes, and intuitive practices. It encompasses the tacit knowledge, instinct, and situational awareness officers accumulate over time (Garrihy, 2020). This includes the ability to read the atmosphere, act with discretion, maintain boundaries, and remain vigilant and resilient in the face of emotional and physical strain (Gredecki & Horrocks, 2017; Liebling et al., 2011; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Peacock et al., 2017). As Crawley and Crawley (2008) aptly note, "how things are done is as important as what is done."

Beyond technique or cultural framing, jail craft is bound up with ideas of professionalism, fairness, authority, procedural justice, and legitimacy (Crewe et al., 2015; Liebling, 2011). As Liebling (2011) argues, effective prison work entails a form of moral performance in which officers not only implement rules but interpret and mediate them in the complex social environment of the prison. This interpretive labour requires consistency, honesty, and restraint – qualities that foster both procedural justice and institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Crewe et al. (2015) demonstrate that the manner in which officers exercise their authority and relate to incarcerated persons – whether marked by distributive fairness, respect, and clarity, or by distance, inconsistency, and cynicism – has profound implications for prisoners' perceptions of safety, trust, and the legitimacy of penal power. Jail craft, in this sense, becomes more than a tactical repertoire: it is a professional ethos rooted in ethical engagement, relational competence, and moral responsibility.

Garrihy (2021) builds on and deepens this conceptualization by emphasizing the relational, performative, and identity-forming nature of jail craft. Rather than viewing it as a fixed set of competencies, Garrihy presents jail craft as a dynamic and socially situated process through which officers make sense of their roles and the prison environment. Officers engage in a continuous negotiation of expectations, drawing on tacit knowledge, embodied awareness, and intuition to navigate the tensions between care and control, discretion and discipline. Jail craft enables officers to manage their authority not through rigid rule enforcement, but through an adaptive relational competence that fosters order and legitimacy in informal ways. It includes the ability to reflect on one's mistakes, adapt to difficult situations, and earn the respect of both peers and incarcerated persons. Critically, jail craft is not just something one acquires, it must be validated – recognized by others as the mark of a competent and trustworthy officer. Officers who embody it often describe a kind of sensory intelligence: a sense that something "just doesn't feel right" (Nixon & Woodward, 2024, p.28). This intuitive judgement is key to maintaining order and safety, particularly in volatile environments.

Yet the transmission of jail craft appears to be under threat. The loss of experienced staff, rising turnover rates, and the premature promotion of inexperienced officers have disrupted traditional forms of mentorship and learning (Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Peacock et al., 2017; van Dijk, 2023). This is particularly concerning because jail craft is not taught solely through formal training – it is observed, practiced, and absorbed (Garrihy, 2021; Gredecki & Horrocks, 2017; Peacock et al. 2017). Becoming a prison officer is, in part, about gaining access to this cultural knowledge, often by demonstrating commitment, earning trust, and being willing to learn from seasoned colleagues. As new staff navigate a workplace where they are not immediately accepted, they must work to integrate themselves into the culture and prove their capability. Jail craft, then, is both a form of occupational expertise and a badge of belonging – essential to both 'the desire of doing the job well for its own sake' (Sennett, 2008, p.9) and being accepted as a real officer.

2.2.2 Professionalism and the Relational Core of Prison Work

Regardless for the smooth running of any prison, the centrality of staff-prisoner relations and staff professionalism have long been recognized (Liebling & Price, 2001; Liebling, 2011). Liebling (2004, p. 236) defines staff-prisoner relationships as "the manner in, and extent to which, staff and incarcerated persons interact during rule-enforcing and non-rule-enforcing transactions". Control and security flow from getting those relationships 'right', which is crucial for maintaining a negotiated prison order (Snacken, 2005; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995).

Prison order relies on both "passive security" (i.e. measures such as bars, high walls, and electronic devices) and "dynamic security". This dynamic security is founded on positive interactions and constructive relationships between staff and incarcerated persons, characterized by mutual respect and trust (Dunbar, 1985; Snacken, 2005; Sparks, Hay & Bottoms, 1996). As highlighted by Gilbert (1997) and Crewe (2009; 2011), the notion of prison officers wielding absolute power within correctional facilities is debunked as a myth, no longer reflective of contemporary realities. According to authors like Johnsen, Granheim, and Helgesen (2011), the role of prison officers is increasingly viewed as relational, emphasizing the importance of building and maintaining relationships. Closely linked to dynamic security is the concept of dynamic authority (Liebling, 2011), which underscores the idea that authority is not simply imposed through rules or force but is enacted through legitimacy, fairness, and moral judgment. Officers exercising dynamic authority are attuned to the relational context of their actions. They engage with prisoners in ways that blend formal authority with emotional intelligence, discretion, and ethical consistency. This form of authority is negotiated and situational, grounded in officers' ability to read context, act with restraint, and communicate effectively. It enables prison staff to manage order not merely through compliance, but through the cultivation of trust and moral credibility.

The ways in which officers understand and perform their relational work are also shaped by broader institutional and cultural orientations. As Liebling et al. (2020) observe, penal systems and their staff can be differently oriented in their relationships with incarcerated persons. Some systems, such as the Dutch, exhibit a present-orientation, focusing on humane containment, equality, and relational trust in the *here and now*, often exercising wide discretionary power to manage daily prison life smoothly. Others – like the Norwegian – embody a more future-oriented model, emphasizing rehabilitation, safety, and normative transformation through structured and formalized interventions (Liebling et al., 2020). These temporal orientations influence the relational stance of officers: whether their authority is grounded in the maintenance of everyday order through discretion and familiarity (present-oriented), or in guiding prisoners toward an envisioned "good life" beyond custody (future-oriented). In practice, these orientations shape how officers evaluate interactions, when they intervene, and how they interpret their role – as custodians of stability or as facilitators of change.

Good and supportive relationships between staff and prisoners are vital to the quality of life in prison (Liebling et al., 2005). Scott (2008, p. 168) suggests that while these relationships may not eliminate the "structural" pains of imprisonment for prisoners, they can either alleviate or intensify their suffering. Liebling, Price and Shefer (2011) emphasize that officers are not simply rule enforcers but moral agents whose discretionary decisions, such as whether to apply a sanction, ignore a minor transgression, or intervene in conflict, carry ethical weight. Such discretion is central to the relational aspect of prison work, as officers regularly balance control with care and authority with respect. However, simply being nice or overly reliant on social harmony and the avoidance of conflicts can lead to chaos. In that regard, there are distinctions to be made between 'good' and 'right' relationships. 'Right' relationships exist in a delicate balance between formality and informality, closeness and distance, policing by consent, and imposing order. These relationships are characterized by respect and a quiet flow of power (Liebling, 2011).

Understanding and building rapport with incarcerated persons are crucial components of prison officer's role. This ability is considered an important aspect of jail craft. Despite the persistent "us and them" mentality in staff-prisoner relations, officers take pride in maintaining a congenial relationship with incarcerated persons. Except in extreme cases, this is usually viewed as an attainable goal (Garrihy, 2018). Officers take pride in their communication skills, valuing the ability to employ humour, cajoling, firmness, and discretion as situationally appropriate. These social skills are seen as the essential lubricant that ensures the smooth operation of the prison and effective management of prisoners (Garrihy, 2018). Research has consistently shown that such relationships are not only essential for prison safety but also for the wellbeing of incarcerated persons. Humane and respectful treatment by staff is associated with lower levels of misconduct (Reisig & Mesko, 2009; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995) and reduced psychological distress (Biggam & Power, 1997; Liebling et al., 2005; Slotboom et al., 2011). In this sense, relationships are not merely instrumental for control, they shape the lived emotional and mental experience of imprisonment.

Importantly, the environment in which these relationships unfold also plays a decisive role. Theoretical insights suggest that architecture can either facilitate or inhibit social interaction (Beijersbergen et al., 2016; Gifford, 2007; Sommer, 1971). Prison scholars have increasingly drawn attention to how factors such as unit size, layout, and spatial openness influence staff-prisoner dynamics (Hancock & Jewkes, 2011; Shefer & Liebling, 2008; Tait, 2011). For instance, Woolf (1991), in his investigation of major disturbances in British prisons, argued that poor prison design significantly undermines the atmosphere in prisons and the quality of staff-prisoner interactions. Although design is not a sufficient cause of relational breakdown, it can either constrain or enable effective relational work.

2.2.3 The Four Pillars of Prison Legitimacy

Morgan (1994; 1997) argues that a stable prison regime requires seeking an equal priority and balance between custody, order, care and justice. Custody entails the responsibility to safeguard society from potential escapes by ensuring the confinement of incarcerated individuals. Within this framework, passive and dynamic security, discussed previously, represent two strategies toward this goal. The custodial task cannot be seen separately from the internal order of a prison. Ensuring a safe and orderly environment for both incarcerated persons and staff is equally paramount. Order is defined by Sparks, Bottoms and Hay (1996, p.119) as, "an orderly situation is any long-standing pattern of social relations (characterized by a minimum level of respect for persons) in which the expectations that participants have of one another are commonly met, though not necessarily without contestation." While order signifies a prevailing social condition, control serves as a means to achieve it, involving the implementation of routines and various formal and informal practices. In contemporary prisons, order is often described as a negotiated order, intricately intertwined with dynamic security measures, rather than existing in isolation (Snacken, 2005; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995; Tournel & Kennes, 2011).

It is increasingly acknowledged that care and justice are not only duties in themselves but are also fundamental conditions to attain order in prison (Snacken, 1999, 2005). Care refers to the presence of meaningful activities, healthcare, and social contacts that are necessary to maintain and also promote the physical and mental wellbeing of incarcerated persons. As Marshall (1997) noted, an active regime with attractive incentives, tailored to local circumstances (flexibility), is integral to dynamic security. According to

Crewe (2007), the extent to which incarcerated individuals accept the prison regime partly depends on how well it satisfies principles of justice. This includes fair treatment and consistent outcomes, effective grievance procedures, and the motivation and explanation of decisions by staff. Emphasizing justice also means recognizing that prisoners' goods and services should not be seen merely as privileges, awarded or withdrawn at discretion, but that prison officers must pay attention to incarcerated persons' legitimate expectations regarding their treatment (Snacken, 2005). A humane regime and fair procedures reinforce the fragile legitimacy of the prison for incarcerated persons, influencing staff-prisoner relationships, local culture, and the institutional climate (Sparks et al., 1996, p. 304). The duties of custody, order, care, and justice are thus equally important, and prison officers must strive to balance all four, a challenging but essential task.

However, as Tournel (2015) critically observes, this balancing act is not always pursued in an ideal-typical or disinterested fashion. In practice, prison officers may engage in a degree of instrumentalization of care and justice, invoking these principles selectively or tactically, rather than from a consistent ethical commitment. For instance, acts of care or flexibility may be offered not out of humanitarian concern, but to secure compliance, defuse tension, or reinforce authority. Justice may similarly be interpreted in terms of what maintains control or eases daily operations, rather than in line with procedural fairness. Officers thus pragmatically navigate these dimensions in a way that supports their own working conditions, role performance, and internal group norms. As Tournel (2015) shows, care and justice can become operational tools in a broader strategy of maintaining control and minimizing disruption, revealing a nuanced and sometimes ambivalent relationship between values and practice in the prison context.

2.2.4 Interpreting the Rules: Discretion as a Core Competency

One of the core mechanisms through which prison officers navigate the daily complexities of their work is the exercise of discretion. Governance within carceral institutions does not function solely through rules but also through the situated interpretations and decisions made by street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). Discretion refers to the capacity of individual officers to interpret and implement policies, rules, or informal norms, based on context-specific judgments rather than rigid adherence to protocol (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). While formal policies and procedures aim to offer a consistent operational framework, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the interpretive and discretionary practices of frontline staff (Gilbert, 1997; Kelly, 2014; Lerman & Page, 2012). Prison officers are powerful agents within the prison system, being able to use their discretion as a means of implementing penal policy. According to Gilbert (1997), prison managers need to accept that officers have to exercise discretion, especially in situations where policy is vague, or in some rare circumstances, absent.

Whilst the structured nature of the prison encourages prison officers to comply with, and follow, all prison rules, it is noted that this is not routinely possible.

Discretion is not merely a practical necessity due to gaps or ambiguities in policy; it is also a relational and strategic tool. Research has shown that prison officers often exercise discretion not in pursuit of leniency per se, but to maintain long-term advantages in managing the prison environment (Crewe, 2011; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling, 2000; Sparks et al., 1996; Tournel, 2015). Officers commonly refrain from formal sanctions in response to minor infractions, recognizing that using the disciplinary system too readily can inflame tensions, damage working relationships, and undermine unit stability. In these decisions, officers weigh factors such as the perceived character of the incarcerated person, prevailing dynamics on the unit, and the informal enforcement norms among their peers (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Tournel, 2015). Such practices reflect what Tournel (2015) and Garrihy (2020) describe as the constant negotiation of grey areas, where prison officers must determine what counts as acceptable behaviour, not only by institutional standards but also by peer and situational expectations.

Officers also contemplate what rules their colleagues enforce and how other officers will assess how they execute their discretionary decision-making. These assessments are themselves informed by a recognition that attempting to enforce more than a fraction of the rules would overwhelm their workload (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). However, discretion is double-edged. It can be used to mediate tensions, but also to exclude, punish informally, or reinforce unofficial hierarchies within the prison (Beckett, 2016; Sim, 2008). The selective use or non-use of formal rules can reproduce inequalities, especially when discretion is shaped by implicit biases or workplace cynicism (Halsey & Deegan, 2017; Stohr & Walsh, 2018). On the other hand, an underuse of authority, based on a desire to avoid conflict or a naïve belief in harmony, may also compromise safety. As Liebling (2011) observed, the most effective officers are not those who avoid using authority, but those who wield it with fairness, restraint, and moral clarity. Doing so requires officers to skilfully draw on the mastery of their craft to weigh many personal, organizational, and security considerations in the balance (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020).

This leads to a form of power that is less overt and more embedded in the social fabric of prison life. Officers now rely less on coercion and more on the psychological dimensions of power, what Crewe (2011, p. 456) calls soft power, which ‘grips tightly, constrains effectively and is highly intrusive’. This form of authority is maintained not through constant enforcement, but through subtle, situational control. The relational quality of discretion thus becomes central, as officers must constantly interpret how much power to exercise, in what form, and toward whom. As such, there is perhaps some degree of benefit to incarcerated persons in developing relationships with prison officers as a tool through which to achieve privileges. Given the complexity of the relationships that exist between prison officers and prisoners, power can shift and change through repetition of interaction. Whilst this power is often not explicit, Layder (2004) argues that much of what happens in the prison setting is sensitive to the power that prison officers hold in these complex social organisations. As Garrihy (2020) emphasizes, officers engage in jailing as a continuous process of interpreting signals, managing risks, and negotiating relationships, where discretion is essential but also under surveillance from both peers and supervisors (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020).

In sum, discretion is a cornerstone of prison officer practice – facilitating relational management, supporting institutional order, and enhancing the perceived legitimacy of prison authority. At the same time, it reflects the broader tensions inherent in prison work: between control and care, between formal policy and everyday practice, and between personal judgment and shared professional norms. Discretion is therefore not merely a technical tool, but a core element of professional decision-making that demands reflection (Kommer, 2018; van Dijk, 2023).

2.3 The Accursed Craft: The Burden of Carceral Work

In their analysis of the Russian penal system, Pallot et al. (2010, p.17) describe prison work as an "accursed craft," a term that captures the moral ambiguity, emotional burden, and institutional distinctiveness of the occupation. The phrase "Prison work is an accursed craft and for this troubled business you need people who are firm, but kind and merry" invokes both a cautionary expression and a source of professional pride (Pallot et al., 2010, p.17). It sets the tone for a form of prison labour that is framed not merely as employment, but as a morally fraught vocation requiring individuals with a particular moral and emotional disposition.

The metaphor of the "accursed craft" implies interrelated characteristics of penal work through dirty work and emotional labour. First, it is tainted through its association with punishment, control, and human suffering (Tracy & Scott, 2007). Second, it is depicted as demanding, not only in physical terms, but also in its requirement for emotional resilience (Crawley, 2004a; Hochschild, 1983). Yet, conceptualizing it as a craft none the less fosters identification and a sense of collective belonging. The framing of prison work as an "accursed craft" serves not only to define the nature of the work itself, but also to legitimize its emotional and social costs by embedding them in a broader narrative of duty and honour (Pallot et al., 2010).

2.3.1 Contamination and Stigma in Penal Labour

The term dirty work, as introduced by Hughes (1951), refers to tasks and occupations that contaminate and stigmatize the workers who perform them. The dirtiness of these occupations is socially constructed, based on perceived associations with physically, socially, morally, emotionally, and psychologically undesirable tasks (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Garrihy, 2021; McMurray & Ward, 2014; Mikkelsen, 2022; Tracy & Scott, 2007). Society seeks to maintain symbolic boundaries between what is considered pure and impure (Douglas, 1966), and in doing so, it assigns the handling of dirt to particular occupational agents (Hughes, 1962). When taint becomes ubiquitous – deeply embedded across multiple dimensions of the job – those who perform it come to be regarded as dirty workers (Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006). Physical taint refers to jobs linked to dirt, waste, bodily fluids, or death, or those seen as being performed in dangerous or unpleasant environments. Social taint stems from regular interaction with already stigmatized individuals or groups, or from roles that imply subservience to others. Moral taint involves occupations viewed as morally questionable or ethically dubious, or those that rely on practices seen as deceptive, invasive, aggressive, or otherwise socially inappropriate (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 415). Emotional taint stems from managing and performing problematic, challenging or inappropriate emotions (McMurray and Ward, 2014; Rivera, 2014). Lastly, psychological taint stems from three sources: ‘the psychological processes demanded to engage in dirty work professions, sustained exposure to a group stigmatized for psychological disorders, and the pernicious psychological effects of the work’ (Garrihy, 2021, p.2).

In the case of prison officers, this taint is multifaceted and deeply entrenched. Physical taint stems from the constant exposure to violence, bodily fluids, and invasive tasks such as strip searches. Social taint is a product of working in close proximity with incarcerated individuals who are already stigmatized, making the worker tainted by association (Eriksson, 2016). Prison officers deflect the taint that rubs off from incarcerated persons (Brodsky, 1982). Moral taint arises from public perceptions that see the role of prison officers as ethically questionable, complicit in an inherently punitive and coercive system (Tracy & Scott, 2007). Emotional taint, as McMurray and Ward (2014) note, is linked to the need to manage others’ distressing emotions – feelings that are difficult to express or even acknowledge within the boundaries of masculine, authoritarian work cultures. Finally, psychological taint reflects the coping mechanisms officers develop, such as hyper-vigilance or emotional suppression, which are functional in prison but often misaligned with societal norms outside its walls (Garrihy, 2021) and closely relates to what Tournel (2015) described as carceral harm for prison officers.

Yet these taints are not merely symbolic or cognitive, they are embodied and viscerally felt. As Mikkelsen (2022) emphasizes, the experience of dirty work is often embedded in the material and sensory world of the prison. Officers do not simply reflect on contamination, they live it through tense posture, physical proximity to aggression, and bodily discomfort. Officers may, for example, alter their bodily positioning to maintain distance from prisoners, or experience heightened physical stress responses that signal how taint manifests corporeally. These embodied responses point to a felt dirtiness that is as much physical as it is symbolic. Both Garrihy (2021) and Mikkelsen (2022) highlight that officers often become vessels for the anger, fear, and despair of others through affective transmission. This emotional contagion is involuntary, occurring through prolonged exposure in tense environments. Officers may try to resist this by adopting rigid emotional boundaries, or deflect emotional intensity through humour, banter or cynicism.

Prison officers are highly conscious of the stigma that surrounds their occupation. Rather than passively accepting this external judgement, many actively engage in strategies to counteract the negative perceptions associated with their work (Chenault & Collins, 2019; Eriksson, 2021). These efforts aim not only to protect their self-image but also to affirm the legitimacy and value of their role. These strategies can be grouped into two main categories: the construction of occupational ideologies and the use of social weighting (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2007). Occupational ideologies serve to reinterpret the nature of the job and include three key approaches: refocusing (redirecting attention toward untainted aspects of the role), recalibrating (adjusting evaluative criteria to revalue stigmatized tasks), and reframing (reinterpreting the meaning of the work itself) (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). In addition to these cognitive strategies, workers frequently draw on adapted forms of neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957), such as the denial of responsibility, injury, or victimhood, as well as selective social weighting, wherein the legitimacy of external critics is undermined (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Research specific to prison work further highlights practices such as distancing, depersonalization, and ambivalent identification, where workers oscillate between engagement with and detachment from certain aspects of their role (Eriksson, 2021; Garrihy, 2021; Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2012; Tracy & Scott, 2007). These taint management strategies are not discrete or mutually exclusive, rather, they often intersect and reinforce one another. As Simpson et al. (2012) note, the deployment of one strategy may prompt or necessitate the use of another, depending on contextual factors and the nature of the occupational stigma encountered.

The uniform plays a key role in this process of symbolic reconstruction. As Crawley (2004a, p. 140) notes, it can be understood as a kind of "decontamination suit," forming a visible and material barrier between officers and the polluting environment of the prison. At the same time, the uniform functions as a marker of professional status, reinforcing internal group identity and serving as a defense against the embodied experience of taint. As Fassin (2016, p.146) noted, officers' work is often viewed as 'a profession in search of honour,' reflecting the negative associations and perceived stigma attached to the occupation, which is deeply internalized and accentuated within prison officer cultures. Given the isolation of prison work from broader society, the recognition and valuation primarily occur within their occupational circles. The perceived lack of organizational acknowledgment and credibility further underscores the importance of recognition and status among peers (Garrihy, 2021).

2.3.2 Frontstage Discipline: The Choreography of Emotion in Jail Craft

The conceptualization of jail craft among prison officers heavily relies on their adeptness at managing emotions and impressions to effectively portray their desired professional personas (Garrihy, 2020; 2021). The emotional demands of the prison environment can be significant, as officers are expected to maintain a professional demeanour while also addressing the emotional needs of incarcerated individuals (Crawley, 2004b). Prison officers are required to maintain order, ensure security, and manage interactions with incarcerated persons, who may exhibit aggressive, manipulative, or distressed behaviours. This environment creates a high demand for emotional regulation.

Liebling, Price, and Shefer (2011) highlight the dual role of prison officers as both enforcers of rules and providers of support, necessitating complex emotional regulation. Doing so requires prison officers to engage in, as introduced by Hochschild (1983), 'emotional labour'. She described this as the act of managing one's feelings and expressions in accordance with the emotional requirements or expectations of a job. Hochschild (1983) explains that emotional labour is accomplished through surface or deep acting. Surface acting involves disguising true feelings or pretending to feel something that one does not, while deep acting involves altering one's actual emotions to align with the required display (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting is about "deceiving others about what we really feel but without deceiving ourselves," whereas deep acting involves "deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others" (Hochschild, 1983: 33). Deep acting taps into emotive effort, which attempts to experience the emotions one is required to display and can result in estrangement from the self (Hochschild, 1983; Kruml and Geddes, 2000). Surface acting, on the other hand, might lead to emotive dissonance, which is the discrepancy between genuinely felt emotions and artificially feigned ones (Hochschild, 1983). The emotional labour expectations of employees are shaped by explicit or implied organizational demands and expectations regarding what emotions to display and which to suppress. According to Hochschild (1983), these feeling rules – also referred to as display rules by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) – create a necessary discrepancy between actual feelings and displayed emotions.

However, emotional labour in prison is not a uniform phenomenon. It varies across subcultures, wings, and national contexts. For instance, Nylander, Lindberg and Bruhn (2011) found that prison officers adopt varying emotional strategies depending on their unit or role. Officers in treatment wings engaged more often in deep acting and developed more emotionally engaged, rehabilitative interactions. In contrast, officers in security wings relied more on surface acting and emotional detachment, which often led to cynicism or emotional exhaustion. Emotional labour, therefore, not only reflects institutional mandates but also the informal norms developed within specific teams or units. Officers also reported using collective coping strategies, such as humour, rotation of difficult emotional tasks (e.g. delivering bad news), or backstage venting, to manage emotional strain.

The affective demands of jail craft are especially pronounced when care and custody expectations conflict. Halsey & Deegan (2017) and Humblet (2020) show that prison officers, particularly those working with older or vulnerable prisoners, experience moral and emotional tensions when forced to adopt caregiving roles they feel untrained for. Officers often engaged in surface acting, offering kindness while emotionally detaching, to comply with institutional expectations while shielding themselves from the perceived stigma of performing ‘feminized’ caring tasks. Deviating from the normative ‘sameness principle’, treating all prisoners the same regardless of vulnerability, could even provoke peer criticism. Moreover, emotional labour is further complicated by gendered expectations and professional identity. Prison officers tend to downplay or suppress emotional expressions associated with care, compassion, or intimacy – qualities deemed incompatible with custodial authority and professionalism. Both Humblet (2020) and Nylander, Lindberg and Bruhn (2011) show how the emotional performances of prison officers are constrained by unspoken institutional codes: be personal but not private, be humane but not too soft, be firm but not aggressive. While emotional regulation can be functional – serving security and staff safety, it often comes at a personal cost. As Hochschild (1983) warned, surface acting over long periods can lead to alienation or burnout, while deep acting may exhaust emotional resources. Emotional labour in prisons is thus not only a form of interpersonal regulation but a site of moral conflict, institutional strain, and occupational negotiation.

Crawley (2004b) delineates the tacit emotional norms that structure prison officers’ conduct, emphasizing how affective performances are tightly regulated through culturally embedded occupational expectations. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework of front and backstage, Crawley (2004b) situates prison officers within a social field that demands frontstage performances of authority, emotional restraint, and detachment, scripts that must be credibly enacted before a dual audience of incarcerated persons and peers (Crawley, 2004b). However, Crewe et al. (2014) complicate this frontstage-backstage dichotomy by introducing a spatialized theory of affect within carceral environments. Rejecting a binary model of impression management, they conceptualize prisons as affectively zoned spaces, where emotion is not only socially scripted but also geographically orchestrated. Drawing from Goffman's later spatial sensibilities in *Asylums* (1961), and Hochschild's (1983) notion of "feeling rules," Crewe et al. (2014, p.57) argue that the prison comprises differentiated "emotion zones" – liminal or heterotopic spaces where dominant carceral logics of emotional suppression are suspended or reconfigured. These zones function as micro-enclaves of affective leakage, where staff can deviate from the emotional codes. Such a perspective reframes affect not simply as an individual performance under institutional surveillance, but as a relational, spatially mediated construct. Integrating Crewe et al.'s (2014) spatial-emotional cartography with Crawley's (2004b) insights thus yields a more nuanced analytic frame: one that situates emotional labour not merely within interactional orders, but also within the architectural and symbolic geographies of penal space.

2.4 Navigating Carceral Space

There is a growing literature in criminology, carceral geography and architecture studies, among other related fields, that seeks to explore prison architecture, its aesthetic components and/or its relationship with the lived experience of carceral space (Beijersbergen et al., 2016; Fransson et al., 2018; Karthaus et al., 2019). The concept of "the carceral" has been expanded beyond the physical confines of prisons to encompass a wider range of spaces and institutions and how these spaces are embedded within broader social, political, and economic structures, and how they intersect with the production of space (Moran et al., 2016). Prison scholars have found that prison architecture (distance, mobility, lighting, sounds) is an important determinant when studying the quality of interactions within prisons (Beyens et al., 2011).

2.4.1 Spatial Dimensions of the Prison Officer Workplace

The spatial configuration of prisons is not a neutral backdrop but an active agent in shaping carceral relationships, institutional routines, and the affective experiences of prison staff. Drawing on the conceptual insights of carceral geography (Moran et al., 2018), several studies have demonstrated how prison architecture structures the relational and emotional dynamics between officers and incarcerated persons. Beijersbergen et al. (2014), for instance, showed that institutional layout (e.g. panopticon versus campus-style) and design characteristics (e.g. size and date of construction) significantly mediate staff-prisoner interactions. In institutions with more fragmented and enclosed layouts, more distant and impersonal relationships with staff were reported, while facilities that promoted spatial openness and accessibility were associated with increased relational proximity and familiarity.

These findings resonate with the argument that space enables and constrains institutional logics. As Hammerlin and Mathiassen (2011) and Beyens et al. (2011) note, small-scale facilities allow for expedited decision-making and mutual recognition between staff and incarcerated persons, reinforcing informal governance practices and enabling more responsive custodial relationships. Such insights foreground the need to attend to the "distinctive geographies" of incarceration to fully grasp how socio-spatial relations are co-constituted within carceral settings (van Hoven & Sibley, 2008, p. 1004).

Extending this perspective, Mario et al. (2024) introduce an affective and sensory dimension to architectural analysis, arguing that prison officers do not merely operate *in* institutional space but experience it bodily and emotionally. Describing certain facilities in terms of dark, noisy, and emotionally taxing, while others offered more light, quiet, and cleanliness. These findings underscore that space is not only symbolic but embodied, shaping officer wellbeing, perceived control, and emotional labour. Grzesiak, Rychlik and Nowogrodzka (2021) further reveal that institutional form – comprising spatial design, security level, technological saturation, and urban location – constitutes a set of interrelated stressors that structure occupational experience. High-security and highly monitored environments produce greater emotional strain than semi-open or peripheral facilities, demonstrating that carceral architecture cannot be disaggregated from the emotional geographies of prison work (Crewe et al., 2014; Jewkes, 2018; Mario et al., 2024).

From this theoretical lens, hard or strain-inducing environments, as described by Carlson and Thomas (2006) and Martin et al. (2012), can be read not only as risk factors for misconduct but as incubators of systemic distrust and burnout. In contrast, spatial arrangements that facilitate routine interaction may function as tools of relational governance, reducing friction and enhancing trust. However, this depends critically on how space is used rather than simply how it is designed. Direct supervision, while intended to promote engagement, can backfire when not accompanied by adequate institutional supports, sometimes leading officers to feel more vulnerable. Architectural typologies such as linear and podular models (Wooldredge & Steiner, 2014) exemplify how spatial logics produce different modes of visibility, proximity, and control. These layouts implicitly define who owns institutional space and under what conditions officers physically or symbolically enter the incarcerated person domain. In both models, visibility is a central axis of governance. As Nadel (2023) emphasizes, visibility acts as a deterrent to misconduct, enabling mutual surveillance and reinforcing informal regulation.

Technological mediation – through CCTV and other remote observation tools – has transformed correctional practice by centralizing control and deskilling interpersonal engagement (Allard, Wortley & Steward, 2006).

This shift contributes to a broader cultural reconfiguration of prison work. As Hancock and Jewkes (2011) argue, hyper-monitored environments erode trust not only between officers and incarcerated persons but also within staff teams. Surveillance, rather than simply enhancing safety, can produce fragmentation, alienation, and disconnection. Maculan and Rodelli (2022) confirm this with findings on in-group disintegration among officers in isolated surveillance roles, suggesting that spatial-technological regimes undermine occupational solidarity and relational autonomy.

This dynamic reveals a paradox at the heart of institutional design: architecture's effectiveness is not only a matter of spatial logic but of human enactment. Designs intended to promote interaction (e.g. direct supervision) often fail if officers retreat into control centres (Nadel, 2023). Conversely, in poorly designed environments, a strong normative culture among staff – emphasizing fairness, protection, and communication – can mitigate spatial deficits. In other words, architectural intentions are always filtered through institutional culture, discretionary practices, and the affective orientations of those who inhabit them. Architecture, then, does not determine carceral practice in any deterministic sense, it enables, constrains, and is itself shaped by the economies of prison work.

2.4.2 Imagined Carceral Space

Previous prison research has demonstrated that carceral spaces are not only defined by physical architecture but are saturated with sensory, emotional, and symbolic elements – filled with a cacophony of sounds, a potent mix of smells, and a swirl of competing affective intensities (Crewe et al., 2014; Herrity et al., 2021; Mario et al., 2024). These studies foreground how spatial characteristics, such as lighting, temperature, colour, materiality, and movement, intersect with sensory experiences to generate not just impressions of place, but enduring atmospheres (Hemsworth, 2016; Turner, Moran & Jewkes, 2022; van Hoven & Sibley, 2008). Building on this carceral geography perspective, scholars have argued that atmospheres should not be seen merely as static or environmental, but as affective climates, simultaneously material and metaphorical, and co-produced by institutional form, individual perception, and broader socio-cultural imaginaries (Turner & Peters, 2015).

These atmospheres are not incidental, they are engineered, evoked, and experienced through a dynamic interplay of spatial design, routine practice, and embodied presence. Turner and Peters (2015, p. 315) suggest that people can become attuned to the "elusive, intangible, felt aspects of carceral space" that "seep from, and are designed, engineered and co-constituted around material and visual components." Similarly, Crewe's (2011) metaphor of tightness, the power of the prison to "wrap up, smother and incite", evokes the atmospheric compression experienced by those inside, reinforcing that carceral atmospheres are engulfing and bodily as much as spatial and symbolic.

Yet, to fully understand how atmospheres are experienced by staff, it is necessary to incorporate the spatial metaphors of confinement and stuckness (Jefferson, Turner & Jensen, 2019). While confinement refers to physical boundaries – walls, fences, gates – stuckness captures the more insidious forms of spatial immobility and psychological insularity that officers experience. Prison officers, much like incarcerated persons, undergo a process of spatial and emotional adjustment in response to their immersion in the carceral environment (Arnold, 2005; Garrihy, 2021). Their operational routines, shaped by security imperatives, architectural design, and spatial immobility, produce a pervasive sense of being physically and emotionally contained. This is particularly evident in solitary confinement units, where officers report feeling spatially trapped and psychologically depleted, subject to rigid routines and lacking meaningful interaction (Mears et al., 2023).

In such atmospheres, the prison ceases to be merely a workplace and becomes what Goffman (1961) would call a total institution – a self-contained world that imposes psychological confinement through routine, surveillance, and emotional withdrawal. Officers may develop coping mechanisms (Crawley, 2004b; Kauffman, 1988), internalizing the emotional demands of the role and forming mental boundaries that mirror the physical ones around them. This process contributes to what Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) term a condition where individuals feel isolated not just physically, but socially and psychologically, cut off from others and from their own emotional registers.

Such atmospheres of tension and fear (Poole & Regoli, 1981) are exacerbated when officers feel unsupported by supervisors and disconnected from colleagues, conditions that not only induce work alienation but also destabilize the solidarity that has long been central to prison officer occupational culture (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2020). When spatial confinement is coupled with social isolation, such as when officers are assigned to posts requiring solitary vigilance, occupational culture itself may fracture. As Maculan and Rodelli (2022) observe, working alone hinders the formation of in-group camaraderie, weakening the cultural scaffolding that traditionally offered protection, belonging, and professional identity.

Prison atmospheres are not static – they are sensed, navigated, and interpreted in real time. Officers must attune themselves to 'changes in the health and atmosphere of the prison' as part of their operational grip' (Gooch, 2020, p. 18). Such attunement is central to their capacity to maintain control, anticipate volatility, and establish relational authority. But when the sensory field is distorted by feelings of stuckness, alienation, or fragmentation, that grip can loosen. In this sense, carceral atmospheres are not merely 'felt'; they also mediate the very conditions of institutional functionality, legitimacy, and survival.

2.4.3 The Three Dimensions of Proximity: Spatial, Relational, Experiential

According to Jefferson and Gaborit (2015), atmospheres may also be affected by the level of proximity in carceral environments. A concept that they define as the degree of closeness or distance between actors across daily life (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015). The concept of proximity in the prison context operates across three key dimensions that are interconnected: spatial, relational, and experiential. Spatial proximity refers to the physical arrangement of space and how it structures interactions between prisoners and staff (Hillier & Hanson, 1988). In prisons, spaces such as cell blocks, common areas, and gate areas are not just physical locations but are designed to control movement and interaction. One of the most defining characteristics of prisons is that of separation, which is the opposite of proximity. Doors, locks, corridors and so on not only demarcate a separation of space but also of people. Some prisons emphasize separation, with entrances and gate areas kept distant from prisoners, reducing the opportunities for interaction and creating a sense of detachment (Johnsen et al., 2023). This architectural separation can reinforce institutional detachment and limit informal contact. However, not all prison environments follow this model. Weinrath et al. (2016) found that direct supervision units collapse spatial distance by embedding officers within incarcerated persons living spaces, thereby encouraging more frequent and informal interactions, thus enabling proximity through design. Yet, as Weinrath and colleagues (2016) caution, increased spatial closeness does not automatically result in meaningful engagement, relational depth must still be cultivated through staff practice and institutional culture.

Relational proximity extends beyond physical distance to encompass the social and emotional qualities of interaction. It concerns the intensity, frequency, and type of engagement between officers and incarcerated persons, unfolding in zones of continuous negotiation (Crewe et al., 2014; Meško & Hacin, 2019). As Crawley and Crawley (2008, p.140) stated 'close proximity to prisoners *over time*, in the context of what is, after all, a highly domestic and thus a relatively intimate environment, make it impossible to maintain – at least for any length of time – the notion of 'them and us', and many *do* develop close bonds with certain prisoners'. Over time, the spatial closeness and shared domestic space may create conditions where rigid occupational roles soften, and human relationships emerge – even in an environment meant to enforce separation and control.

The architecture of the prison plays a crucial role in mediating these dynamics. Physical layouts that promote openness and co-presence can facilitate more informal, dialogical forms of engagement. However, this potential is complicated by the presence of surveillance technologies, which can reduce the perceived need for direct human contact. As Evans et al. (2023) argue, technological oversight – such as strategically placed cameras – often displaces relational work, diminishing the importance of staff presence and proximity in certain areas. In this way, the spatial organization of prisons shapes not only how prisoners and staff coexist, the types of interactions that occur between them, but also how they are experienced.

Experiential proximity refers to the 'shared experiental worlds' of prisoners and staff' (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015, p.149), reflecting how both groups are affected by the prison environment. This dimension focuses on how confinement shapes the psychological and emotional lives of those within the prison, often leading to shared feelings of stuckness or hardship (Jefferson, Turner & Jensen, 2019; Mears et al., 2023). Officers' interactions and proximity are defining characteristics of their occupation (Garrihy, 2023). They work long, consecutive shifts in prisons, where the architecture and spatial design promote close proximity (Beijersbergen et al., 2016). This shared experience of close physical and social proximity contributes to a sense of a common fate among officers, whether positive or negative (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2023). This feeling arises from the intricate interplay between various aspects of their occupational culture and the lived experiences they report. These three dimensions – spatial, relational, and experiential – interact to create the unique atmosphere of a prison. Spatial proximity sets the stage for the type of relational and experiential closeness or distance that develops, and together, these dimensions shape how power is distributed and how life in prison is experienced by both staff and incarcerated persons. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for analysing the relational dynamics and daily working across carceral spaces.

2.4.4 Work, Role, and Field: Embeddedness of Prison Officers

The embedded work role perspective provides a valuable framework for understanding the attitudes and behaviours of prison officers, as it examines how their roles are embedded within the broader organizational and societal context. Prisons and prison officers are embedded within particular penal fields, which are relatively bounded social spaces with unique historical and cultural traditions (Lerman & Page, 2012; Melossi, 2001). The concept of 'embeddedness' is used to highlight the interconnectedness between practice and social environment. Institutions and those who work inside of them are embedded in relationships that affect their orientation and operations and must be understood within the particular context in which they are embedded. The local context mediates the transfer of policies from one place to another, giving the imported policies a local flavour (Nelken, 2010, 2011). Therefor prison officers' perspectives are affected by their position in their respective penal field. The practice of prison officers is the product of both the dispositions that shape perception and the position within the social field. Experienced prison officers intuitively grasp the acceptable actions of that field (Bourdieu, 1980, p.67). The position of individuals, groups, and organizations in social fields greatly influences their′ perceptions and, ultimately, behaviour. Actors in a field – particularly those who have similar positions in the field (as do prison officers) – tend to have similar viewpoints. Because all practice is embedded within particular objective contexts, we cannot understand actors' attitudes or actions solely by examining their biographies, demographic characteristics, or positions within organizations. Instead, we must understand the broader context and meaning in which they operate (Lerman & Page, 2012).

However, the work that prison officers do and the responsibilities they hold – rather than the policy environment, demographics, or other factors – largely shape their attitudes about imprisonment and other job-related issues. Prison officers are embedded, first, in their workplace, and second, in the penal field – and both positions significantly affect their views. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, prison officers develop a working personality that is characterized by deep suspicion, hyper-vigilance, social isolation, cynicism, and an 'us' versus 'them' attitude (Arnold, Liebling and Tait, 2007; Crawley, 2004a; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling, Price and Shefer, 2011; Tournel, 2015).

Liebling (2008) argues that variations in prison staff culture may also occur, but that the precise shape prison officer culture takes varies in degree rather than kind. Considerable research contends that the occupational role shapes workers' professional orientations (Crawley, 2004; Haney et al., 1973; Jacobs and Retsky, 1980; Liebling, 2008; Lin, 2000; Owen, 1988; Skolnick, 1966; Sykes, 2007 [1958]). Prison officers labour in prisons that are embedded in social contexts, which affect their ideological attitudes concerning the purpose of imprisonment. Although prison officers have a unique job that greatly influences their attitudes about penal policies, they are also concerned with more abstract norms, ideas, and ideologies that are shaped by the broader settings in which they are situated. The particular policy environment in which they and their institutions are embedded also shapes their views, and this varies substantially between countries (Lerman & Page, 2012). The concept of the embedded work role perspective therefor asserts that the attitude of prison officers is affected by the respective field in which they reside but that the professional orientation should be similar when comparable occupational roles within those fields are performed.

2.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has laid the conceptual groundwork for understanding jail craft. The literature has shown that it emerges at the intersection of multiple dimensions: culture, emotion, taint, institutional embeddedness, and carceral space. Each theoretical strand contributes to a deeper understanding of how officers acquire, sustain, and negotiate their craft.

Through the literature, it became clear that jail craft is not simply about skills or tacit knowledge. As Sennett (2008) reminds us, craftsmanship entails a desire and aspiration to do a job well for its own sake – a form of commitment to the practice itself. In the context of prison work, this resonates with the notion of professionalism as moral engagement: being a "good officer" not only in terms of competence, but in terms of judgment, presence, and relational awareness (Crawley, 2004; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011).

However, the review also shows that jail craft cannot be reduced to an individual attribute or disposition. It is a deeply collective and cultural practice, sustained through shared norms, mutual expectations, and moral codes embedded in everyday routines. Officers do not learn their craft primarily through formal training but by working together – by sharing experiences, humour, and cautionary tales that circulate within the prison walls. Jail craft thus functions as a form of occupational heritage, passed between generations and constantly reshaped within the moral and institutional boundaries of the prison.

This cultural dimension links jail craft directly to the literature on prison officer culture, which emphasises how solidarity, suspicion, and moral judgment form the interpretive repertoire through which officers make sense of their environment (Crawley, 2004; Garrihy, 2023; Liebling, 2011). Culture gives jail craft its social grammar: it defines what is permissible, what is valued, and what remains unsaid. Yet, culture also constrains craft, as certain coping mechanisms – emotional detachment, cynicism, or gendered toughness – can inhibit reflection or empathy.

To practise jail craft effectively, officers must also learn to navigate the institutional and spatial environments in which they work. The prison is not a neutral backdrop but an active force that shapes how work is performed. Officers must orient themselves within prison space – knowing how to move through corridors, when to step in, and when to hold back. This spatial awareness connects jail craft to the literature on carceral geography and proximity (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015; Moran et al., 2018), which highlights how architecture, visibility, and design regulate the relational possibilities of imprisonment. Officers don't just work in the prison; they learn to think and feel through its space, attuning themselves to its rhythms, atmospheres, and silences.

The prison is also an emotionally and morally demanding environment, and officers rely on specific social and psychological processes to manage its pressures. Research by Crawley (2004b), Garrihy (2021), and Peacock et al. (2017) describes how humour, detachment, and camaraderie act as social defences against the anxiety inherent in coercive care work. From the outside, such defences can appear as indifference or "psychological dirt," but they are, in fact, vital emotional mechanisms that allow officers to function and sustain moral coherence under strain. Emotional labour is therefore integral to jail craft: it is how officers transform vulnerability into professionalism and maintain control without entirely surrendering empathy. At the same time, the literature on embeddedness (Lerman & Page, 2012) reveals that jail craft is never free-floating. It is conditioned by the governance models, hierarchies, and temporalities of each prison system.

Finally, the literature converges on a central insight: jail craft is not only about what officers do, but how they do it, and under what conditions this how becomes possible. It represents the capacity to manage power, emotion, and uncertainty in ways that sustain both safety and dignity. It is about knowing when to enforce and when to hold back, when to speak and when silence holds greater authority. Above all, it is about reading and responding to the affective temperature of the prison – sensing when something feels "off," and acting before it escalates.

3 Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the differences and similarities in the working practices, experiences, and occupational cultures of prison officers working in Belgian and Dutch prisons. The focus lies on how officers carry out their work, how they construct their professional identity and craft, and how these processes are influenced by national policy contexts, staffing structures, and penal cultures. This emphasis on the similarities and differences regarding daily practices led to the adoption of a comparative ethnographic research design in four prison facilities across both countries. Ethnographic research offers the opportunity to gain in-depth insight, through prolonged presence in the field, into the implicit routines, social interactions, and institutional logics that shape the work of prison staff. It allows the researcher to systematically study institutional practices, occupational cultures, and human agency in their natural settings, with the aim of contributing to conceptual development that goes beyond the mere description of a specific case (Hammersley, 2018; Simmons & Smith, 2019). Through this comparative ethnographic approach, both shared and context-specific elements of prison work in Belgium and the Netherlands can be brought to light.

This chapter seeks to promote methodological transparency by elucidating the research process and the approach to data collection and analysis, while also addressing the various theoretical, ethical, and practical challenges encountered throughout the study. The chapter begins by exploring the ontological and methodological significance of critical realism for the study. Following this discussion, the rationale for adopting a comparative ethnographic research design is articulated. Ethnographic research is particularly powerful in its capacity to provide in-depth insights into occupational cultures (Brewer, 2000). The study involved 13 months of continuous immersive participant observation across four prisons, with two located in each country. This approach was further enriched by 76 semi-structured interviews conducted with prison officers of varying ranks, emphasizing task and function differentiation. Engaging in social research entails navigating a multitude of decisions that can significantly influence the trajectory of the investigation. These decisions may encompass challenges to the researcher's ethical, academic, or personal commitments and principles. The pursuit of social research necessitates high levels of empathy, trust, and adaptability between the researcher and the subjects of study. Finally, a detailed account of the data collection process is provided, including an examination of the four distinct contexts in which the data were gathered. The chapter concludes with an overview of the various stages of data analysis and the subsequent process of composing the thesis.

3.1 The Three Anchors of Critical Realist Thought

This research is grounded in critical realism, which offers a valuable philosophical framework for exploring the local practices and experiences of prison officers in both countries while acknowledging the deeper institutional structures that shape them. At the heart of this framework lies the relationship between ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality (Bhaskar, 1998, 2014). As Bhaskar argues, it is an epistemic fallacy to reduce what exists (ontology) to what can be known (epistemology) – a critique equally directed at positivism's empiricism and constructivism's discursive relativism. Critical realism avoids both extremes by asserting that an external reality exists independently of our conceptual access to it, but that our knowledge of this reality is inevitably partial, fallible, and historically situated (Sayer, 2000; Huisman, 1996).

Emerging from the paradigm debates of the 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), critical realism has evolved into a comprehensive philosophy of science that bridges positivist and interpretivist approaches (Brown, Fleetwood, & Roberts, 2002). This dual commitment is especially valuable in ethnographic prison research, where meaning-making and material conditions are deeply entangled. While critical realism recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge (as emphasised by Berger & Luckmann, 1966), it also maintains that such constructions are always referential: they point to underlying structures and mechanisms that may not be directly observable but are nonetheless real.

Historically, early ethnographers such as Malinowski (1922) and researchers from the Chicago School approached social life with a form of naïve realism, assuming that long-term immersion could yield unmediated access to truth. These early efforts underplayed the researcher's positionality and the interpretive nature of fieldwork. Over time, and influenced by post-positivist developments, reflexivity became central to ethnographic practice (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). However, critical realism adds further depth to this reflexive turn by developing depth-reflexivity: a critical engagement not only with the researcher's positionality but also with the ontological layers – empirical, actual, and real – that shape both data production and interpretation (Quraishi et al., 2022).

Critical realism thus provides a stratified ontology of reality. At the empirical level, we find observable events and experiences, such as prison officers' narratives and interactions. The actual level comprises events that occur whether or not they are experienced or recorded. At the real level, we locate the generative mechanisms – institutional logics, power dynamics, professional cultures – that produce observable phenomena under certain conditions (Danermark et al., 2002). These mechanisms are often activity-dependent and must be inferred, rather than observed directly (Bhaskar, 2014).

To uncover such mechanisms, critical realism employs a distinct analytic logic based on abduction and retroduction. Drawing on Fletcher (2016), this study identifies demi-regularities in officers' accounts – recurrent patterns of experience or meaning – which serve as entry points for theorizing deeper causal tendencies. Through abduction, theoretical concepts (e.g. emotional labour, craft erosion) are introduced to reframe and interpret empirical patterns. Through retroduction, the analysis moves from observed phenomena to hypothesized mechanisms that may explain them, such as the structural effects of functional differentiation or the erosion of institutional trust.

Critical realism's commitment to judgmental rationality, the idea that competing explanations can and should be evaluated, is also central to this research. While knowledge is always partial and conditioned, not all theories are equally valid. Theories can be assessed based on their empirical adequacy, explanatory depth, coherence, and ability to engage with the complex realities of prison work (Bhaskar, 1998; Layder, 1990; Sayer, 2010). In this study, theoretical refinement is pursued not as a search for final truth but as an iterative process of developing more adequate explanations for the structurally situated experiences of prison officers.

Finally, critical realism helps reconcile two central ambitions of this research: taking the subjective perspectives of prison officers seriously while embedding those perspectives within broader structures of meaning, policy, and institutional organisation. This is particularly relevant in ethnographic research across multiple national contexts, where institutional arrangements, policy trajectories, and professional cultures intersect in complex ways. Critical realism provides a framework for exploring such complexity without collapsing structure into agency or vice versa, and for maintaining an epistemologically modest but ontologically ambitious stance in qualitative social research.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1 Ethnographic comparative research

> *"The point is that unless we can somehow get a grasp on the ways our cultural assumptions shape our comparative projects, we are unlikely to make progress in understanding another society"* (Nelken, 2010: 26)

Ethnographic comparative research was employed to immerse the researcher in the daily realities of prison environments in Belgium and the Netherlands. This approach provided deep insights into the lived experiences of prison staff, their relationships with each other and with other actors within the carceral environment, and the distinct cultures both within and between the research settings. In this study, understanding the experiences of different prison officer roles and the impact of changing penal policies is central to building on existing research. The first argument for ethnographic comparative research is the necessity of comparing both the intent of policies and their eventual outcomes (Nelken, 2010). In both countries, new legal policies were introduced: in Belgium, this pertains to the differentiation of prison officer roles, while in the Netherlands, there was a further implementation of behavioural assessments conducted by prison officers. In both cases, there is a lack of qualitative data and understanding of the implications of these policies for the practice of prison officer work.

A crucial element in understanding the comparative analyses is culture, which serves as a foundational aspect of the central concept of this study: jail craft. Nelken (2010) highlights the value of exploring diverse cultural systems and encourages learning from one another. However, he also warns of two potential pitfalls: ethnocentrism, the tendency to view one's own culture as universally applicable, and relativism, which suggests that different cultures cannot be compared. These cautions are essential for ensuring a balanced understanding of cultural contexts in research. To mitigate the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and relativism, several strategies can be employed, including being virtually there, researching there or living there. While living there is often considered the most effective approach, in practical terms, researching there was the most feasible option for this study. Although the researcher spent considerable time in both countries, he has only truly lived in Belgium. Critical realism addresses these tensions by combining epistemic relativism with ontological realism, allowing for situated knowledge that remains open to critical evaluation. Rather than suspending judgment in the face of cultural difference, critical realism endorses judgemental rationality (Bhaskar, 1998), through which different systems can be compared, criticized, and learned from. In this research, the comparative ethnographic approach – based on researching there rather than living there – reflects an attempt to engage deeply with different penal contexts while remaining reflexive about the limits and conditions of such knowledge production (Blaustein, 2014).

Being physically present in the research setting enabled the researcher to experience the nuances of the working environments firsthand. This presence allowed for meaningful engagement with prison officers and facilitated direct observation of the activities and interactions occurring within these settings. Such immersive experiences are crucial for gaining insights into the cultural dynamics and daily practices of the officers involved. The data that was gathered by researching there allowed for a nuanced exploration of cultural contexts. It enabled the researcher to immerse himself in different settings, gaining a deep understanding of the lived experiences of prison officers within those contexts. This approach facilitated the identification of both unique and shared cultural elements, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of social dynamics at a local level (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Importantly, the ethnographic immersion in the field was complemented by a collaborative approach at the analytical level. This involved regular exchanges with the Dutch co-supervisor and continuous discussion of emerging findings with experts from the Dutch prison field. These collaborations allowed for critical reflection on the data, helped to contextualize the findings within the Dutch penal system, and sharpened the comparative dimension of the research. In this way, the study combined the strengths of immersive fieldwork with cross-national dialogue and expert engagement, ensuring both empirical depth and analytical robustness.

3.2.2 Preparation of the study

Before commencing the primary research, a pilot study investigating the role of prison officers was conducted by Esther Jehaes, a researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, in a small Belgian remand prison from August to December 2019. Although Tournel (2015) had previously conducted an in-depth ethnographic study on the occupational experiences of prison officers in one Flemish prison, her research was limited to a single facility: a newly built prison. By contrast, the pilot study took place in an older remand prison. It was therefore intended to explore how officers' experiences might differ depending on the local characteristics of the institution, the population, and the anticipated implementation of function differentiation in the Belgian prison context. During this period, she undertook 300 hours of participant observation and conducted 12 in-depth interviews with prison officers. The pilot study revealed that research with prison officers presents both methodological and practical challenges. Many officers expressed feelings of being undervalued by researchers and, compounded by work-related pressures such as overcrowding, sick leave, and absenteeism, were initially hesitant to engage in interviews. To facilitate participation, it was essential to establish trust through comprehensive participant observation across all shifts, which ultimately helped identify officers willing to contribute. In addition to trust issues, time constraints and staffing shortages further impeded formal interview participation. Consequently, informal conversations during observations proved invaluable for gathering adequate data regarding local practices and the experiences of staff. Furthermore, the pilot study underscored the necessity of including various types of prisons as research settings. This recommendation arose from the insights of staff who had previously worked in other facilities characterized by differing architectural designs, levels of overcrowding, staff cohesion, and the overall atmosphere of the work environment.

The researcher of the present study systematically analysed all preliminary data at the outset of his appointment, preparing for fieldwork in the four selected prisons. This preparatory process comprised three primary steps. First, the researcher reviewed the observation notes and interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the pilot prison's operational dynamics. The memos generated by the previous researcher were instrumental in identifying and integrating themes that had emerged from the data, while the researcher's own memos were added to provide an overview of initial insights. Second, the researcher listened to the audio recordings of the interviews. Although transcripts accurately capture the words spoken, they often fail to convey the tone, pauses, emphasis, and emotional nuance of the respondents. Vocal inflections, sighs, laughter, and hesitations can yield additional insights into the interviewees' emotions and attitudes. Listening to the audio recordings enabled the researcher to detect these subtleties, which sometimes altered or enriched the interpretation of the respondents' statements. Given that transcriptions might contain errors or overlook key words, listening to the interviews ensured that the messages were accurately conveyed and also allowed the researcher to immerse himself in the original conversations. Lastly, the researcher utilized MAXQDA to code the preliminary data. During this phase, the primary initial themes of the pilot study were identified, including emotional labour, dirty work, staff professionalism, relationships within the prison (among peers, management, union representatives, and incarcerated individuals), and the role development and training of prison officers. These themes served as guiding principles, though not exclusively, throughout the fieldwork conducted in the other four institutions.

3.2.3 Gaining access to the field

The process of entering the field is a pivotal moment in qualitative research and was quite different for Belgium and the Netherlands. The Belgian penitentiary system, which has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, is generally open to research endeavours within its institutions (Beyens et al., 2015). For this study, official permission was secured from both the Belgian Prison Service and the local prison administration. The use of recording devices was authorized, with the stipulation that the recordings would solely serve the purposes of this research and that all audio files would be permanently erased afterwards. Consequently, the true identities of the interviewees were deliberately excluded from the study. The research methodologies employed, along with the procedures for obtaining informed consent and the ethical considerations outlined, were all reviewed and approved by the Ethics Commission in Human Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Although initial permission was granted for the preferred prisons, the Belgian Prison Service later argued that due to severe overcrowding and understaffing within a specific prison, it was deemed unfeasible to conduct intensive observations at that time. Furthermore, they assessed the likelihood of conducting sufficient interviews with the staff as minimal, given the existing staff shortages at that time. In consultation with the Belgian prison service, an alternative prison (Prison A) was selected that met the criteria established by the researchers. For the research conducted in the second Belgian prison (Prison B), the timing was delayed to autumn in consultation with the administration due to a reduced number of staff during the summer months. Additionally, this adjustment presented a unique opportunity to observe newly hired personnel. The implementation of job differentiation, based on the penitentiary law of March 23, 2019, was scheduled to begin with the first group of detention supervisors trainees at the end of August. These individuals were to be transferred to the newly opened detention centre following their tenure at Prison B.

Gaining access to Dutch prisons proved to be a protracted and complex process, echoing earlier observations by Vanhouche (2022) regarding the challenges of conducting ethnographic research in carceral settings. The formal application process, which began in October 2021, extended over nearly a year before final approval was secured. Several interrelated factors contributed to this delay. First, there exists a limited tradition of ethnographic inquiry within the Dutch prison system, particularly with regard to frontline staff. The most recent ethnographic study focused on prison officers dates back to Kommer’s work in 1991, underscoring a long-standing gap in qualitative, field-based penology scholarship in the Netherlands. Second, the original research proposal – envisioned as a mixed-methods project with a substantial quantitative component – was met with reservations by the Scientific Research Department of the Dutch Prison Service. In a system where periodic staff and prisoner surveys are already institutionalized and rigorously implemented, the proposed questionnaire was viewed as potentially redundant. Moreover, concerns were raised that it might impose additional burdens on already stretched staff capacities. These reservations prompted further negotiations and iterative refinements of the research design to better align the project with institutional priorities and ethical considerations. Ultimately, these challenges underscored the importance of methodological adaptability and policy sensitivity in securing access to closed institutions, particularly within administrative systems that prioritize operational efficiency and data coordination.

To address practical concerns and ensure meaningful access to the field, the original research design was revised in close consultation with the Scientific Research Department of the Dutch Prison Service. Rather than implementing a mixed-methods approach, the study evolved into a fully qualitative, ethnographic inquiry. This shift allowed for a more in-depth exploration of how correctional staff engage with the new Law on Sentencing and Protection, particularly in relation to the Promotion and Demotion System and the systematic behavioural assessments it entails. As part of the adapted design, the researcher was granted permission to attend multidisciplinary consultation meetings (MDOs), providing a unique opportunity to observe decision-making processes and the use of discretion – key themes that remained at the heart of the original research aims, now examined through a richer, context-sensitive lens.

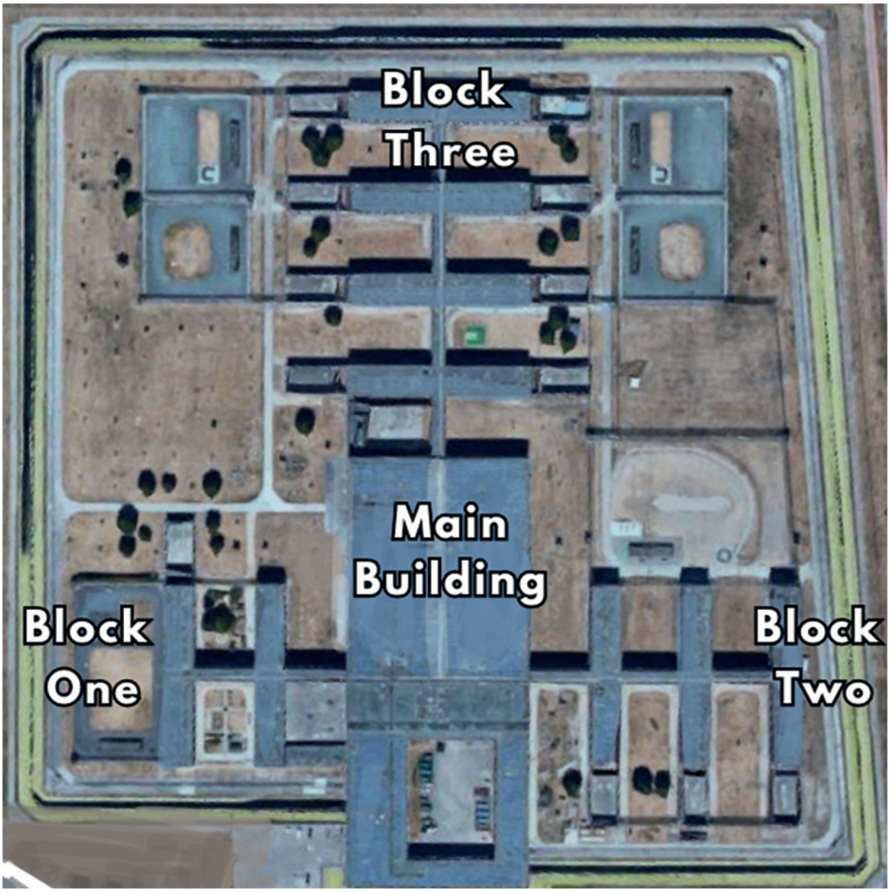


Figure 1. Lay-out of Belgian prison A

A. Prison A

Fieldwork was conducted between March and July 2022, during which it was noted that Prison A functions predominantly as a closed institution. Prison A diverges from the prevalent star-shaped architecture of most Belgian prisons, featuring instead a telephone pole-style design. While this prison was not chosen because of its particular design, data showed that it is an important aspect of staff daily operations. This layout is characterized by perpendicular cellblocks, each equipped with its own command and security centre. The configuration consists of parallel units connected by a central corridor that intersects at right angles, resembling the top of a telephone pole (Bosworth, 2005; Morris & Worrall, 2010). The original intent behind this architectural choice was to enhance security while restricting the movement of incarcerated individuals. This design was internationally lauded for its ability to classify and segregate effectively (Bosworth, 2005; Johnston, 2000). Upon its inception, it was promoted as a more humane alternative compared to earlier prison models, such as radial prisons, aiming to compartmentalize various sections while ensuring a degree of privacy for incarcerated persons without compromising overall safety.

Prison A comprises three distinct blocks, each designed to accommodate specific groups of incarcerated individuals based on their legal status and sentence length. **Block One** is dedicated to women and contains two units for convicted women, one unit for women in pre-trial detention, and two units for interned women. A specialized care team is assigned to provide support to the internees in this block. Additionally, there is a dedicated unit for mothers with children up to three years old, as well as for pregnant women, ensuring that their unique needs are met. **Block Two** consists of ten closed units for men who are either facing pre-trial detention or serving sentences of up to five years, which are categorized as incarcerated persons with short sentences. This block is designed to maintain a secure environment while managing the needs of this population. **Block Three** houses men serving sentences exceeding five years, referred to as incarcerated individuals with long-term sentences. This block features a mix of four semi-open units and six closed units. Incarcerated persons in the semi-open units have access to a multipurpose room and kitchen in the evenings, allowing for communal dining and social interaction, contingent upon adequate staffing levels. Since 2009, four drug-free sections operating under an open community regime have been established within this block. Participation in this drug-free environment is voluntary, and individuals opting for this pathway are subjected to regular drug screenings and monitored by a specialized care team to ensure compliance and support.

A standard unit within Prison A contains a row of 17 cells. A multi-person cell designed for four occupants is located at the rear of the unit, positioned between the stairwell and the storage room. The prison officers' desk is centrally situated within the unit. In closed units, this desk faces the cells, enabling officers to observe the light indicators next to cell doors, which signal that an incarcerated person has a query or appointment. As the activation of these lights does not trigger an auditory alert, incarcerated persons often resort to banging on their cell doors to gain the attention of prison staff. Notably, the desk in closed units is positioned just around the corner, obstructing direct visual access to units across the corridor. In contrast, semi-open and open units allow for direct sightlines, as the desk faces the multipurpose room. Each unit is equipped with a kitchen; however, kitchen access is restricted to incarcerated persons in semi-open and open units. Showers are located adjacent to the kitchen, while an area equipped with washing machines is situated at the front of each unit.

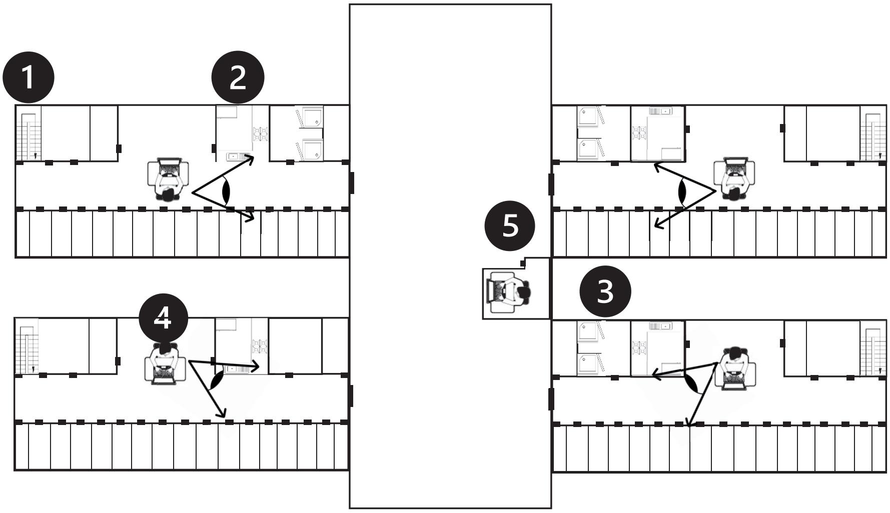


Figure 2. Visual lay-out of prison units in prison A
1. Staircase 2. Kitchen 3. Laundry room 4. Desk with sightlines 5. Control room

All units connect directly to a central corridor. Surveillance cameras and door operations for every four units are managed from a small control room located between two units. Currently, due to overcrowding, many single cells have been adapted for double occupancy, and multi-person cells may accommodate up to six individuals. This decentralized structure necessitates the presence of one prison officer on each unit during daytime hours (from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.), translating to 30 officers assigned to an equal number of units for both morning and afternoon shifts. Each block maintains its own distinct workforce; for instance, a prison officer assigned to Block One typically does not work in Blocks Two or Three unless faced with significant staffing shortages. Consequently, these three blocks function as separate, independent entities, despite their architectural integration into a single larger penitentiary institution.

The telephone pole design facilitates the classification of incarcerated persons and differentiation of regimes, as highlighted by Bosworth (2005). This classification extends across the three blocks and within each block across various units. A year following the prison's construction in 1991, the warden articulated that the intent behind this differentiation and the provision of privacy for incarcerated individuals was central to the design. However, at the time of the study, overcrowding hindered the practical application of these classifications. The scarcity of available cells and beds limited options for placing incarcerated persons in their designated units, particularly pronounced in Block Two, where units of up to 36 incarcerated individuals were often spread across just 18 cells (including one multi-person cell). Such conditions necessitated that some incarcerated persons sleep on the floor or windowsills. To alleviate the strain on Block Two, individuals with short sentences were transferred to Block Three, leading to a subsequent increase in population density in these units in recent years. Although not as severe as in Block Two, most units in Block Three housed between 24 and 28 incarcerated individuals, with occasional surges up to 32, significantly exceeding the intended capacity of 17. Only one unit in Block Three maintained a strict cap of 17 incarcerated persons, designated for those deemed a security risk to themselves or others. In these cases, the cells were modified into 'low-stimulus' rooms, lacking amenities such as microwaves.

Furthermore, the communal regime envisioned during the prison's design has been systematically diminished over the years in response to union pressures advocating for a reduction in incarcerated person movement. Consequently, the use of the multipurpose room in Block Two has been suspended due to overcrowding. In Blocks One and Three, access to the multipurpose room has been significantly curtailed, to the point where semi-open units differ from closed units solely based on the limited accessibility of the multipurpose room for one hour each evening, contingent upon sufficient staff presence.

B. Prison B

Prison B has a distinctive history and architectural design that sets it apart from other correctional facilities in Belgium. Established in 1934 within the premises of an old agricultural school, the prison initially served as a detention centre for vagrants. Following World War II, it also housed collaborators under suspicion. Over time, the facility has evolved into the penitentiary institution we recognize today, characterized by its atypical architectural layout (i.e. prison farm). This open design is particularly noteworthy, as it significantly influences the experiences of both staff and incarcerated persons (De Keyser & Vanhouche, 2019).

Fieldwork was conducted in the last two weeks of August and the first two weeks in October 2022. During the time period of the fieldwork, the prison had an average capacity of 65 incarcerated persons. The prison operates for convicted persons who are two years away from parole. It is one of the few prisons in Belgium that doesn't face overcrowding issues. Incarcerated persons are not admitted directly to Prison B; rather, eligibility for the open regime is assessed beforehand. Prisoners typically serve the last years of their sentence here, with specific conditions for admission, including residency rights in Belgium, a lack of flight risk, the ability to live in a communal setting, and a willingness to work.

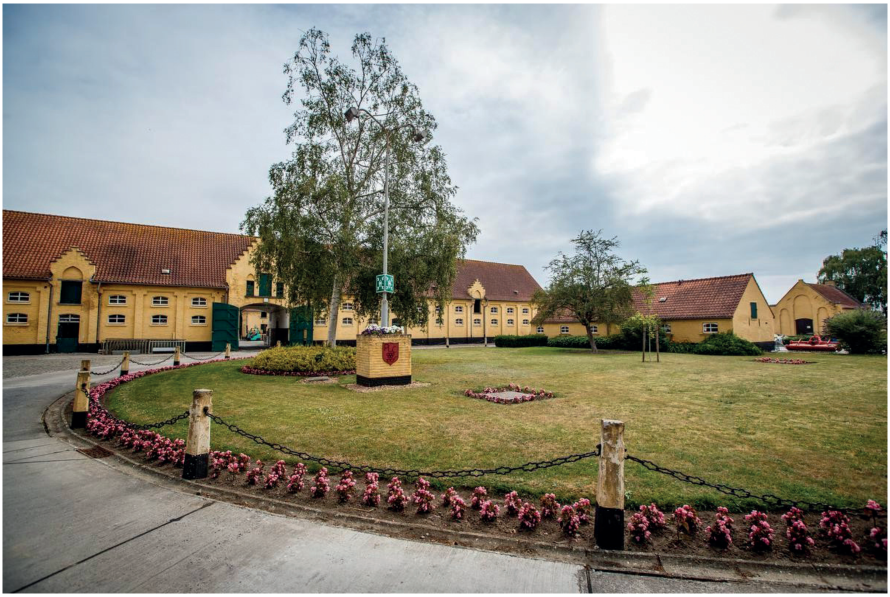


Figure 3. Visual overview of Belgian Prison B

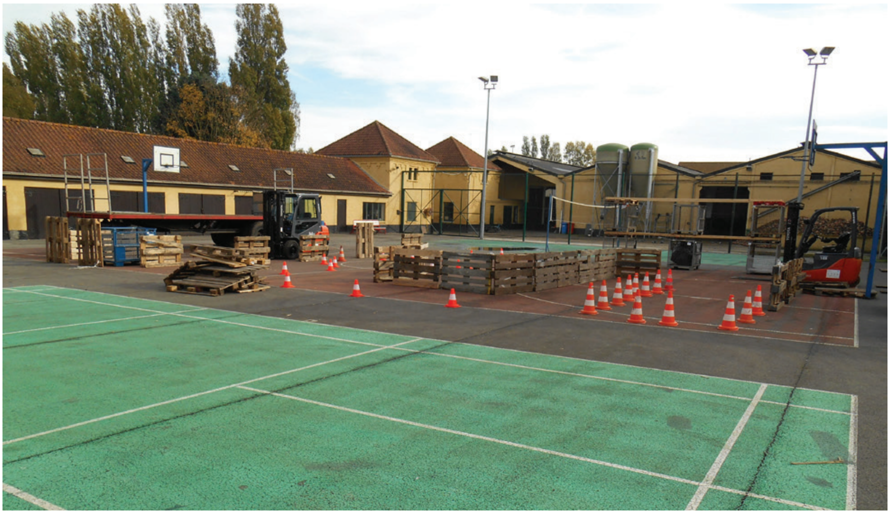


Figure 4. Prison B courtyard and workhouses

Incarcerated persons at Prison B live and sleep communally in rooms known as *chambrettes*, which are small, adjacent chambers equipped with a bed, table, and wardrobe. While these rooms are separated by walls, they do not have ceilings, fostering a sense of shared living. Throughout the day, they enjoy relative freedom of movement within designated sections, accessing facilities such as a fitness area, smoking lounge, television room, and kitchenette at their convenience.

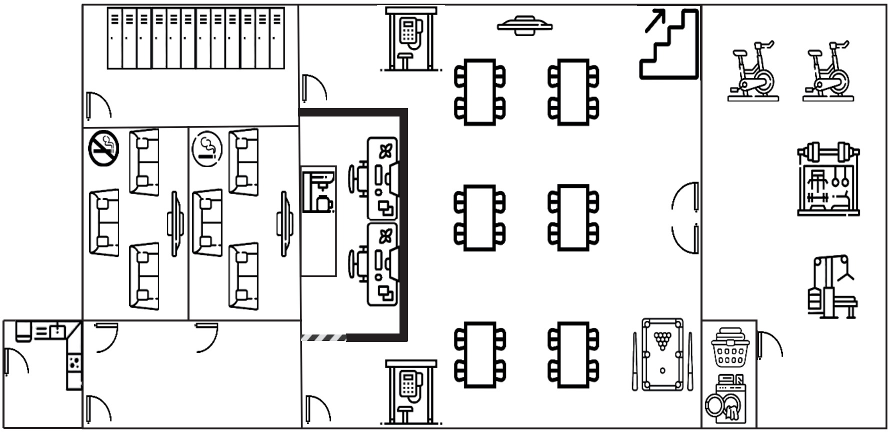


Figure 5. Top-view of the prison landing in prison B

Prison B offers various rehabilitation projects and employment opportunities for incarcerated persons. Five incarcerated individuals are permanently assigned to the daily care of over one hundred cows and calves on the prison farm, which involves tasks such as milking, feeding, and cleaning. In addition, several other incarcerated persons, referred to as 'day cowherds,' support these activities on a rotating basis. This structure allows them to demonstrate their capabilities before securing permanent positions. However, not all experiences are uniformly positive. Incarcerated persons have expressed concerns about the lack of regime differentiation and the communal sleeping arrangements, which contribute to a notable absence of privacy. Nevertheless, they perceive their interactions with prison staff as more intense than in other facilities, fostering moderate to good relationships.

Previous research has highlighted that incarcerated individuals make a clear distinction between their experiences in the prison sections and those on the farm (De Keyser & Vanhouche, 2019). These findings prompted the need for targeted observations to be conducted in various locations within Prison B, enabling a comparative analysis of these differing experiences based on the specific context within the institution.

C. Prison C

Prison C, where fieldwork was conducted from November 2022 until the end of February 2023, is a correctional facility established in 1996 and located in an industrial zone. It is considered a modern institution, characterized by its cross-shaped architectural design. It is divided into two wards, one is reserved for remand prisoners and the other is for convicted prisoners with a total capacity for 442 incarcerated persons. Each side has a central control room strategically positioned at the intersection of three corridors, allowing for comprehensive oversight of those sections that contain 48 double-occupancy cells. The design features a series of low-rise buildings arranged around a central courtyard, which allows for natural light and outdoor access. This architecture aims to reduce the feeling of confinement typically associated with traditional prison designs. The open spaces and natural elements are intended to create a more positive atmosphere.

The penitentiary institution workers (PO^{NL}) are present on the various sections. Their shared work area is strategically located near the entrance of each section; however, it is oriented perpendicular. This design limits the visibility of the PO^{NL} into the cells, posing challenges for supervision and interaction with incarcerated individuals. The Security and Monitoring Service (SO^{NL}) operates from the central post, where they hold responsibility for overseeing the entire prison facility. This position enables them to maintain visual surveillance, both directly and through camera systems. However, the glass walls separating them from the departments inhibit any audible interaction with the incarcerated individuals. This spatial arrangement creates a degree of distance between the staff and the incarcerated persons, potentially influencing the dynamics within the prison environment.

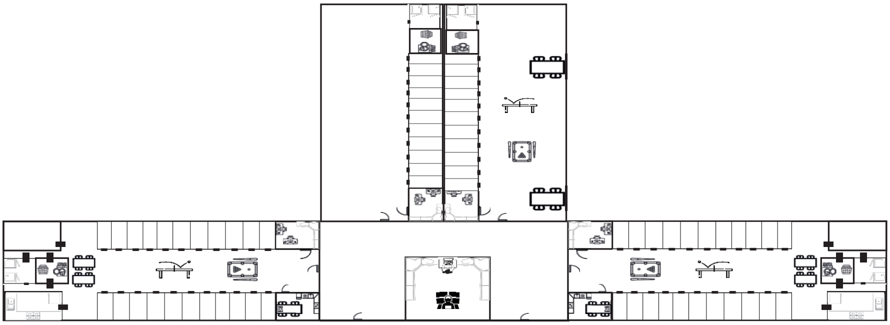


Figure 6. Top view of the prison landing in prison C

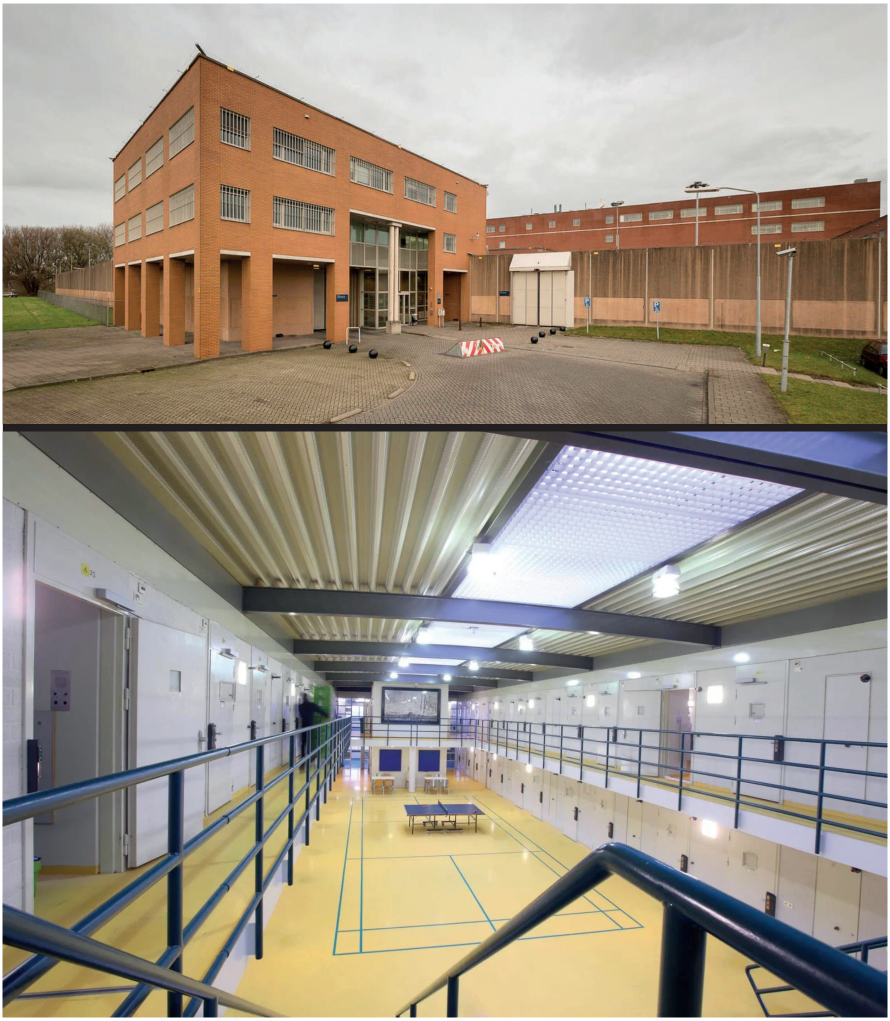


Figure 7. Overview Dutch prison C

What distinguishes Prison C, and consequently Prison D, in their operations in comparison to Belgian prisons, is the presence of PO^{NL} within the walking areas in the Dutch prison system, as opposed to the monitoring practices observed in Belgium, where penitentiary staff supervise daily walks from a centralized observation tower. In the Netherlands, the direct presence of PO^{NL} in the recreation areas facilitates more immediate engagement, promoting interaction and fostering a supportive environment. This approach enables staff to better assess behaviour and provide assistance as needed during recreational periods. The proximity of staff members may also contribute to a heightened sense of security and oversight, enhancing the overall management of incarcerated person activities.

In contrast, the practice in Belgian facilities, where staff oversee courtyards from a tower, emphasizes a more distanced form of supervision. While this method may enhance the perception of security through a broader overview of the area, it can limit direct interactions between staff and incarcerated persons, potentially reducing opportunities for engagement and support during recreational activities.

A second notable difference is the implementation of a daily program linked to a promotion and demotion system. Incarcerated persons are granted access to additional activities and free time outside their cells based on the regime in which they are classified, either basic or plus. This structured daily program not only serves as a mechanism for incentivizing positive behaviour among incarcerated persons but also plays a crucial role in fostering a rehabilitative environment. By categorizing into different regimes, the prison system encourages engagement and participation in various activities, which can enhance their overall wellbeing and contribute to successful reintegration into society. The access to extra activities and leisure time is contingent upon the adherence to the rules and regulations of the facility, thereby creating a direct correlation between behaviour and privileges. This approach aims to promote accountability and personal development while also maintaining order and security within the prison environment.

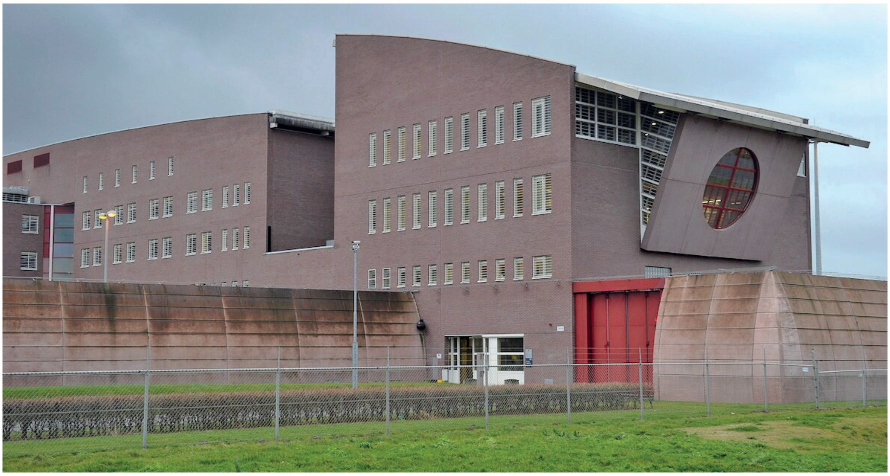


Figure 8. Overview Dutch prison D

D. Prison D

The final prison, referred to as Prison D, was the subject of fieldwork conducted from June 2023 until the end of August 2023. Located in the southern Netherlands, Prison D opened its doors in 1994 as a response to the growing demand for facilities capable of accommodating the increasing number of incarcerated individuals in the country. Its establishment reflects a significant shift in penal philosophy towards more humane treatment of offenders, emphasizing rehabilitation over punitive measures. In terms of architectural design, Prison D shares similarities with Prison C, yet it can be characterized as essentially a scaled-down version of the latter.

Notably, Prison D lacks a central corridor that facilitates separate side for remand and convicted persons. Instead, it adopts a radial design, incorporating a central observation post that enables SO^{NL}s to visually monitor the three main wings. The facility includes one wing designated for remand prisoners and two wings allocated for convicted individuals. Unlike Prison C, where the desk area for PO^{NL} is located close to the entry door for the wing, in Prison D, this area is situated at the back of each wing. However, this configuration remains perpendicular to the wings, which limits the staff's ability to maintain a comprehensive visual overview of the entire wing.

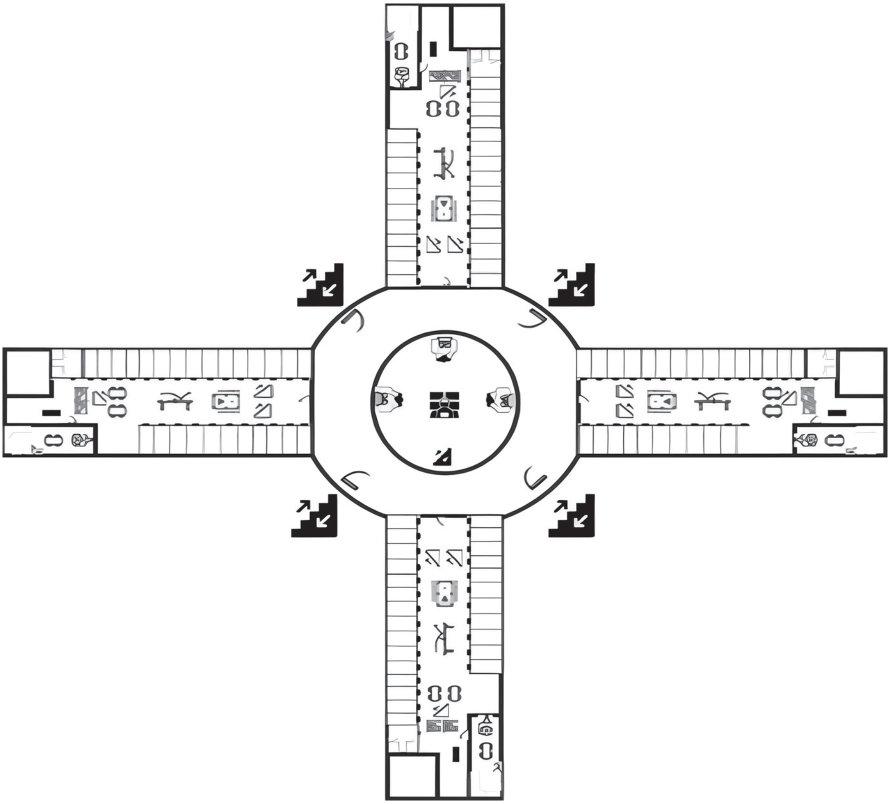


Figure 9. Top view of the prison landings and control room prison D

A significant distinction between Prison D and Prison C is the presence of incarcerated persons classified as ESRD (escape and societal risk detainees). The movements of these incarcerated persons within the facility necessitate additional security measures to ensure the safety of both staff and other incarcerated persons. In this context, ESRD persons are not permitted to move individually; they are always escorted by at least one staff member (PO^{NL}). Furthermore, large movements of incarcerated persons from other wings are prohibited when ESRD incarcerated persons need to relocate to another area within the facility. These precautionary measures have substantial implications for the daily operations of the prison. The implementation of these enhanced security measures results in a greater emphasis on safety within Prison D compared to Prison C. This focus not only affects the operational procedures of the facility but also influences the interaction between the prison population and staff, as well as the overall atmosphere within the prison. The presence of ESRD-status persons and the associated security protocols introduce complexities that can significantly impact the daily routine of the prison.

3.2.4 The practice of data collection

A. Ethnography in different carceral places

Given that the fieldwork was conducted across four distinct penitentiary contexts, the experiences of the researcher varied significantly within this framework. Although the data from the pilot study, conducted by Esther Jehaes, provided rich initial insights for the researcher, he himself had not yet engaged in ethnographic research prior to this. Prison A served as the researcher's first significant experience in this regard. One of the most immediately apparent features of this prison was the scale of the facility and the detachment of various actors within it.

Conducting ethnographic research in this environment was undeniably challenging. Due to the fact that each unit was staffed by only one prison officer, establishing trust and rapport with the personnel became a time-intensive endeavour. Typically, time spent with staff members was limited to individual interactions, making it initially difficult to form a comprehensive understanding of the work environment and culture within the prison. Compounding these challenges was the division of staff into shifts, which complicated the task of locating specific personnel. Moreover, staffing needs often necessitated the reassignment of officers, meaning that individuals with whom the researcher had previously arranged meetings could suddenly be assigned to different shifts without prior notice.

The challenges posed by this prison were foreshadowed by the management's suggestion that the researcher begin in the "smallest" unit, specifically the women's department. Although this unit is smaller in comparison to Block One and Two, the phenomenon of "island formation" was already pronounced. Staff members frequently cautioned that the transition to other departments would present additional difficulties. The phenomenon of island formation was further exacerbated by the closed nature of the regime, as previously described. This led to days of research during which few, if any, significant interactions or assignments from staff members could be observed with colleagues or with incarcerated persons.

The narrative presented by the staff – that there was excessive workload, contrasted sharply with the researcher's observations, which suggested otherwise. This discrepancy resulted in a situation where the interpretations of the researcher and the staff did not align, leading to potential misinterpretations of the environment and the experiences of the staff by the researcher. The researcher shifted from searching for expected observations to concentrating on the realities present within the prison environment and the underlying mechanisms at play. Through informal conversations, the researcher engaged with staff members to gauge their perceptions of their work environment and to explore how, if at all, these experiences differed from those in other prisons where they had previously worked. This shift in focus illuminated the disconnect between the initial expectations of the research and the actual practices observed within the facility. The structure of the prison, characterized by its expansive layout and isolating features, did not align with traditional literature on prison officer culture. These findings suggest that preconceived notions about prison dynamics may not accurately reflect the lived experiences of staff within specific contexts. By prioritizing the actual experiences and insights of staff members, the researcher was able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in prison life and the factors influencing staff behaviour and culture.

Conducting ethnographic research in Prison B, characterized by openness in space, interaction between staff and incarcerated persons, and regime, stands in stark contrast to the experiences within Prison A. Additionally, many staff members active in Prison B had previously worked in Prison A. Although this connection was unknown to the researcher beforehand, it allowed for a comparative approach to understanding the dynamics of both facilities on a deeper interconnected level. Many informal conversations and interviews emerged from dissecting the staff experiences in these two distinct contexts.

The positive effects of spatial openness on both staff and incarcerated persons became evident, as did the impact of the environment on the researcher's own perspective. Notably, the transition into Prison B was accompanied by an initial sense of positivity, underscoring the idea that the aspects absent in Prison A had initially influenced the researcher's outlook. Both prisons can be positioned on a continuum of two extremes, highlighting the importance of spending sufficient time in the research setting to avoid falling into ethnocentrism on a local level. That the fieldwork in Prison B was conducted in two parts, provided the researcher with the opportunity to analyse both institutions from a distance while maintaining a critical lens on Prison B.

During the second part of the research, it became increasingly clear that many of the staff practices were informed by their experiences in other prisons. Although these aspects were less pronounced in Prison B, they nonetheless served as foundational elements in the staff's reasoning regarding their work. A crucial factor in comprehending the context within Prison B was the presence of trainee staff members who had not previously worked in a correctional environment. These individuals frequently expressed that the stereotypical image of correctional staff was prevalent even within this open facility. They observed that established personnel maintained a significant distance from the incarcerated persons population and were often reprimanded when they approached too closely.

This narrative, dominated by a focus on safety, served to communicate to new staff members that maintaining distance is an essential aspect of working in a prison. For those who had taken on the role of detention facilitator, this perspective led, albeit cautiously, to a sense of disconnection from the expectations they had harboured when beginning their roles. The notion that they would engage in activities alongside incarcerated persons was effectively dispelled by the insights of more experienced staff members. The experiences of these trainee staff members highlight for the researcher, the tension between the idealized notions of rehabilitation and the realities of correctional work. Their initial expectations of collaborative engagement with incarcerated persons were confronted with the established practices that prioritized safety and distance. This dissonance not only affected the trainees' understanding of their roles but also has implications for the broader dynamics within the prison environment.

Each transition to a different carceral setting came with its own challenges. Upon starting in Prison C, the researcher was asked to wear a uniform typical of prison officers (PO^{NL}). Although the researcher's naïveté may have diminished after six months of ethnographic study, he acquiesced to this condition. While wearing the uniform felt uncomfortable, it immediately facilitated access to the staff. The introduction was accompanied by inquiries about the researcher's new colleague status, necessitating repeated clarifications that he was acting in the capacity of a researcher. The most significant implications of this decision were evident in interactions with incarcerated persons. Due to the uniform, individuals understandably perceived the researcher as a fully-fledged staff member, leading to daily requests during the first week to open doors. Although the researcher was attired in the uniform, he did not possess a set of keys to the facility, necessitating frequent explanations of his role as a researcher in uniform. This misjudgement prompted immediate discussions with the research supervisors, ultimately leading to a swift re-evaluation of the researcher's attire. Maintaining the independence of the researcher must be visually evident, and in the days that followed, the researcher was repeatedly asked about the sudden disappearance of the uniform. After multiple discussions with the staff, a shared conclusion emerged: wearing a uniform was indeed peculiar. While the uniform initially facilitated access and engagement, it ultimately compromised the researcher's positionality and independence. This experience underscores the importance of carefully considering the implications of researcher appearance in ethnographic studies within correctional settings, as it can profoundly affect the dynamics of interaction and the integrity of the research process.

The assumption that saturation had been reached after studying three distinct correctional settings proved to be a flawed premise. Prison D, due to the presence of incarcerated persons classified as high-risk (ESRD status), exhibited a markedly different atmosphere compared to Prison C. While functional differentiation was clearly evident in Prison C, the more frequent presence of SO^{NL}s on the wings of Prison D facilitated a mechanism that prioritized static security. To the extent that minor, trivial rules were enforced more frequently when they were present on the unit. From a top-down perspective, there was a heightened emphasis on maintaining rules due to the presence of ESRD individuals, which in turn influenced the entire department. The prioritization of enforcing ESRD-related regulations resulted in greater expectations for the researcher to report to staff members. Although the researcher retained a degree of mobility within the facility, this freedom came with increased accountability to the staff, a stark contrast to the conditions in Prison C. Access to other wings, the ability to engage with specific individuals, participation in activities, and the opportunity to join during the daily walk were all scrutinized through a security lens.

During the research period, the surge of contraband being thrown over the walls further exacerbated these security practices. The negotiation dynamics with staff that had been prominently present in Prison A seemed to re-emerge, offering the researcher additional insight into the fluidity of the prison environment. The daily schedules, an essential component of Dutch prisons, were modified to address operational challenges and to mitigate the phenomenon of contraband smuggling. The tension between freedoms and security measures became increasingly pronounced, sharpening the nuances of staff experiences, the constructed nature of prison regimes, and the variability of atmospheres within the facility. The researcher's experience in Prison D highlighted the complexities of saturation in ethnographic studies across different correctional settings. The distinct dynamics present in Prison D, influenced by the presence of high-risk incarcerated persons and heightened security protocols, underscored the need for continued exploration of each unique context. This experience illustrates the fluid nature of prison environments and emphasizes the importance of remaining attentive to the evolving dynamics of safety, freedom, and the staff's working conditions within the ethnographic research process.

B. Observations of actors and spaces

Participant observations are characterized as descriptive and immersive, offering a crucial entry point into the hidden dynamics of prison life. Unlike survey-based methods, which often remain at the level of reported attitudes or abstract experiences, ethnographic observations enable a direct engagement with the practices, interactions, and atmospheres that shape the daily work of prison officers. This method provides access to the informal norms, embodied routines, and micro-politics of the prison environment – elements that remain largely invisible or inaccessible through interviews or questionnaires alone. The immediacy of being there (Nelken, 2010) allows the researcher to witness not only what is said, but how things are done, when they are done, and how meaning is negotiated in situ.

This phase of fieldwork offered initial insights into the institutional logic of each site and helped orient the study to key temporal patterns (shift changes, mealtimes, lockdowns), pivotal moments, and interactional hotspots that were later referenced in interviews. Observations primarily took place on the prison landings, where most officer activity is concentrated, but were also deliberately extended to various other spaces within the prison to capture internal variation and inter-institutional contrast. This facilitated a layered understanding of prison officers' work, enabling the researcher to trace not just what officers say about their job, but how they perform it in everyday contexts.

The less structured approach – revisiting certain units, responding to spontaneous invitations by officers, or engaging in informal conversations over coffee – allowed for rapport-building and the development of trust, which in turn enriched the quality of both observational and interview data. In some instances, prison officers themselves suggested that the researcher return to their unit, viewing their space or role as somehow exemplary or misunderstood. These interactions often led to unprompted disclosures or subtle insights into the emotional and moral negotiations of prison work.

Recording data required ongoing calibration. Initially, attempts were made to transcribe conversations verbatim, but this proved impractical in dynamic settings. Instead, a balance was struck: brief real-time notes were taken, followed by more extensive fieldnotes at the end of the day or during quiet moments. While stepping away for note-taking, as advised in prior research (Tournel, 2015; Van Dijk, 2023), was occasionally possible, it often risked missing important developments. Staff were generally tolerant of note-taking, although some expressed concern over sensitive topics – at times asking not to be quoted or explicitly asking afterwards to not right down certain situations (e.g. degrading and/or racist remarks towards incarcerated persons) should not be interpreted out of context. These moments themselves revealed much about the moral boundaries and performative dimensions of prison officer culture. In sum, the ethnographic approach made it possible to capture the often contradictory, emotionally charged, and deeply embodied nature of prison officer work. It allowed the study to go beyond static job descriptions and official discourse, shedding light on the relational, spatial, and affective textures of carceral life – textures that would remain obscured through surveys or structured interviews alone.

C. Semi-structured interviews

Observational research within the prison context holds substantial value, particularly considering the notion that "it is not unusual for individuals to claim they are engaged in one activity while, in reality, they are involved in another" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 41). Although observations may not fully elucidate all factors influencing behaviours or potential alternative practices, they nonetheless provide critical insights into the mechanisms underpinning specific events. By 'being there', the researcher built trust and generated credibility and familiarity with the prison officers, which is crucial in motivating them to participate in an interview (Arnold et al.,2007; Beyens & Boone, 2013; Vanhouche, 2022). A total of 76 interviews were conducted with prison officers: 24 in prison A, 6 in prison B, 26 in prison C and 20 in prison D. For prison A, because a prison officer must always be present in each unit, most interviews were held at their desk, located in the centre of the unit, at a time that no incarcerated persons were walking around. This was done to avoid putting pressure on staff. Due to staff shortages, the planning of these interviews needed flexibility and could change at any moment. For prison B, C and D all of the interviews were held in a separate room so as to not be disturbed by staff or incarcerated persons. At the commencement of each interview, a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives was provided prior to obtaining oral informed consent. Afterwards the interview would build up with introductory questions about their length of service and whether they had prior experience in another prison. If so, the interviewees were asked to reflect upon their experiences in these different penitentiary environments. From there on the interview proceeded through topics such as staff-prisoner relations, their perceptions of their work role, what it meant for them to be a good prison officer, developments and adaptations throughout their careers, emotions and relationships with peers. Prison officers were also asked to, where possible, give examples of real-life situations. The interviews lasted between 45 and 110 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The prison layout and how this impacted their working experiences emerged as a core theme.

While the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality remains paramount in research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 44), it is imperative to acknowledge that complete anonymity cannot be assured in the context of prison-based interviews. Numerical identifiers were assigned to PO^{BE}, SO^{NL} and PO^{NL} participants for reference. The interviews followed a topic list developed from the analysis of field notes collected during observations. This structure ensured that a comprehensive range of pertinent topics was addressed while permitting flexibility to explore additional areas of interest. The experiences of staff were particularly advantageous if they had prior experience in another prison when comparing differences in how they perceived their job, their relationships within a prison and mechanism that altered their way of working. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed utilizing MAXQDA software.

D. Document analysis

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this dissertation also draws on document analysis to examine how prison officer roles are codified, differentiated, and legitimised within Belgium and the Netherlands. Following Bowen (2009), document analysis is understood as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic materials in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. The method involves finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesising data contained in documents, allowing the researcher to uncover both the formal and implicit logics embedded within policy and legal texts.

The documents analysed included national and ministerial legislation (e.g., the *Ministerial Decree of 1971*, the *Basic Law on the Prison System and the Legal Status of Incarcerated Persons* (2005), and the *Penitentiary Act* (2019) in Belgium; and the *Taak en Toekomst* (1982), *Werkzame Detentie* (1994), and *Modernisering Gevangeniswezen* (2007) memoranda in the Netherlands), as well as draft bills, internal reports, and job descriptions published by the respective prison services. These documents were complemented by parliamentary reports, policy evaluations, and professional frameworks such as the *RSJ* (2012) guidelines on good guidance (*goed bejegenen*). Together, these sources provide the normative and institutional context within which occupational identities are constructed and redefined.

In line with Bowen's (2009) conceptualisation, the analysis proceeded in three stages: skimming, reading, and interpretation. Initial skimming was used to identify relevant sections pertaining to prison officer roles, responsibilities, and professional ethos. This was followed by a close reading focused on how the documents define (or obscure) boundaries between custodial, rehabilitative, and relational work. The interpretive stage integrated the insights from the various documents.

Documents were treated not merely as repositories of factual information but as artefacts that both reflect and produce institutional realities (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). Legislative texts were therefore examined not for their literal content alone, but for what they reveal about the state's expectations of prison officers and how these expectations evolve over time. Following Bowen (2009), the analysis focused on providing historical and contextual background to the occupational field, and tracking changes and continuities in professional discourse.

The use of document analysis was particularly valuable for comparative and historical interpretation. Legislative and policy documents were examined to capture shifting priorities in prison governance. By comparing Belgian and Dutch frameworks, the analysis traced how the professional meaning of prison officer work has been shaped by differing penal philosophies and organisational reforms. The method thus contributed to identifying how occupational differentiation became both a legal mechanism for structuring professionalism.

By systematically analysing legislative, organisational, and policy documents alongside ethnographic and interview data, the research employed document analysis as a form of methodological triangulation (Bowen, 2009; Denzin, 1970). This approach enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed the study to situate everyday prison work within its broader institutional genealogy.

E. Positionality

In this study, my positionality as a researcher is understood as fluid and relational, continuously shaped by the spaces, contexts, and interactions in which the research unfolds (Bayeck, 2022). As Bayeck shows, positionality emerges through the interplay of identity, space, and context, producing shifting roles of insider and outsider rather than fixed categories. My engagement with prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands required navigating professional, cultural, and institutional boundaries, where familiarity with the correctional field through a prior study on prison climate and some experience in uniformed services as a private security guard offered partial insider status, while academic distance and comparative research aims positioned me simultaneously as an outsider. This in-between position (Bayeck, 2022; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) allowed for some understanding of prison officers' occupational worlds and analytical distance necessary for critical interpretation. Recognizing that positionality affects access, rapport, and interpretation, I approach my fieldwork reflexively, acknowledging how my own identity, prior experience, and interpretive lens shaped the production of knowledge about jail craft and prison work cultures.

This multifaceted nature of research engagement became most evident through my identity as a researcher, a factor that significantly influenced how I was perceived and how I interacted with diverse individuals across institutional settings. For instance, in Prison A, my academic background initially aligned me with an administrative perspective due to an association with someone connected to the prison's leadership. However, it appeared that my overt enthusiasm toward the subject of functional differentiation contributed more prominently to this perception than my academic background. Nonetheless, I experienced a marked sense of being an outsider in this facility. This was largely due to the isolating nature of the work, as access was often negotiated on an individual basis with officers stationed alone in their units. While I maintained a constant and visible presence within the daily rhythm of the prison, I remained removed from observing peer to peer interactions.

Contrastingly, my experiences in other prison settings presented a notable divergence. In these environments, I gained greater visibility. This possibility rendered me more approachable to both prison staff and incarcerated individuals. Consequently, unstructured conversations with officers and incarcerated persons became more frequent, facilitating insights into their lived experiences. Within the classic ethnographic challenge of navigating allegiances, often framed as whose side are you on (Liebling, 2001), I encountered complex negotiations of trust and loyalty. My physical presence itself often prompted discussions about certain individuals or practices, inadvertently exposing the nuanced and intricate interplay of roles and perceptions within these confined institutional contexts.

My positionality was also shaped by another key factor: nationality. As a Belgian researcher observing in Dutch prisons, comparisons between the penal systems of Belgium and the Netherlands frequently emerged during interactions, serving both as an icebreaker and a mechanism for building rapport. Notably, this trust stemmed less from my direct questioning and more from their curiosity and engagement. Over time, however, I came to realize that what I initially considered as perceived advantages of one system over another were not uniformly shared by prison staff. In several instances, Dutch personnel expressed skepticism or even concern about features of their own system that, from my Belgian perspective, appeared progressive or beneficial – particularly the extent of autonomy granted to certain categories of incarcerated persons, which some staff members regarded as excessive and potentially problematic.

A particularly insightful dimension of my positionality unfolded during my fieldwork in Prison C, where, as previously mentioned, I conducted research while wearing a staff uniform for a limited period of time. The uniform had been explicitly offered by the institution to ensure that I remained easily identifiable to personnel, and the proposal was framed as a way to facilitate my presence and prevent confusion among staff members. Initially, this arrangement appeared pragmatic: it lowered certain social barriers and contributed to a perceived insider status. The uniform, combined with limited-access tools such as keys and an alarm device, symbolically embedded me within the operational fabric of the prison and granted a degree of mobility that contrasted sharply with the far more restricted conditions I encountered in Prison A.

After consultation with the promotors of the research, we decided to discontinue wearing the uniform and return to my own clothing. Once I switched back to my own clothing, the change did not produce any negative reactions, but it did prompt staff members to question the shift. Their responses took the form of brief comments or curious inquiries about why I was no longer wearing institutional attire. In several encounters, I found myself needing to reassert my role as a researcher, even though I had clearly communicated this positionality from the outset. The uniform had subtly masked that role, creating an assumption of operational belonging that dissipated the moment I returned to my own clothes.

These interactions, often expressed with a surprise at my altered appearance, highlighted the extent to which the uniform structured recognition and belonging within the institution. Reflecting on this, the episode underscored the performative nature of inclusion: the shift from uniform to personal clothing revealed the fragility of this symbolic inclusion and the boundaries of institutional belonging as they were perceived by staff.

3.2.5 Data-analysis

The pilot study was not only preparatory in nature but served as an essential analytic foundation for the broader research. A full analysis of the pilot data was conducted prior to entering the next field sites, enabling the identification of key sensitizing concepts – such as ‘us versus them’, emotional labour, dirty work, and jail craft – that guided early interpretation and comparative reflection. These concepts offered a preliminary framework through which initial observations in Prison A could be compared and contrasted with the pilot findings. As the fieldwork progressed, this comparative orientation was maintained and refined through an iterative analytic process (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), allowing for the flexible incorporation of new conceptual lenses as they emerged from the data. In this way, additional attention was directed toward themes such as carceral geography, job embeddedness, proximity, and liminal space – concepts that became central to understanding how officers experience, interpret, and enact their roles within the institutional contexts of Belgium and the Netherlands.

In the main study, data collection and analysis were not treated as distinct, isolated activities but rather as interdependent processes that informed and shaped one another throughout the research. However, it became apparent that the data collected during interviews often differed from that gathered during observations. This discrepancy can be attributed to the inherent characteristics of prisons as low-trust environments (Liebling, 2004). During observations, particularly in the context of spontaneous discussions or incidents, it is more challenging for participants to engage in socially desirable behaviour compared to formal interview settings. Conducting interviews with prison officers, where they are asked to openly reflect on their daily work practices while being recorded, demands a substantial level of trust. Despite thorough explanations of the research objectives and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, the prison environment can inhibit participants from feeling fully comfortable. This, in turn, can hinder the disclosure of their true perspectives or experiences, as concerns about surveillance or professional repercussions may overshadow the interview process.

From the collected data a first analysis was made making use of the software MAXQDA. Due to the condensed schedule of fieldwork, it was not always possible to immediately proceed with coding after each prison setting. The interview data underwent a full analysis only after the completion of all fieldwork. A preliminary code tree was developed for the coding process, based on the literature review. The data were categorized within the different components of the theoretical framework. In a second phase, the data were inductively translated into codes, allowing for a comparative analysis between the two coding approaches. Given that the foundation of the research is comparative in nature, the data must be analysed both in isolation and in relation to one another. Therefore, the data was initially categorized into separate coding trees for each prison. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination and comparison of the data by code and by prison, facilitating the identification of similarities and differences, as well as the extent to which these patterns were present across the different contexts. In the subsequent chapters, these differences and similarities are presented in detail. The comparative analysis aims to highlight not only the distinct characteristics of each prison environment but also the broader patterns that emerge across the four institutions. By systematically examining these variations, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the specific factors influencing the daily practices and experiences of prison officers within and between prisons in both countries. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how local contexts shape behaviours, perceptions, and institutional dynamics, while also identifying commonalities that may point to larger structural or cultural trends within both penitentiary systems. The findings are situated within the broader theoretical framework, offering insights into both the unique and shared aspects of carceral environments.

3.2.6 Ethics in prison research

Research ethics are fundamental to any empirical inquiry, and their importance is amplified when the subject matter itself touches on ethically sensitive domains. This section addresses two dimensions of ethical engagement within the study. First, it outlines the informed consent and participant confidentiality. Both were carefully observed throughout the research process. Second, it turns to a series of context-specific ethical reflections and dilemmas that emerged across the different phases of the study. These reflections underscore the complex and situated nature of ethical decision-making in fieldwork.

A. Informed Consent

The entire research project was conducted in accordance with the Codes of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium, as well as the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. Prior to the commencement of the study, the full research proposal was submitted to the Ethics Committee of Social

Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where it received formal ethical approval.

Before describing the informed consent procedures it is necessary to mention that before the start of any research activities, the researcher was introduced to the prison staff in all prison by means of an e-mail, containing an introduction of the researcher, a description of the research project, information about how participants' privacy would be protected, and the researcher's contact information in case there were any questions. These emails were distributed by the administration of each prison two weeks before each start of the fieldwork.

For the interviews, the decision was made to obtain both written and oral informed consent. Written by means of a document that entailed all the information regarding the research, the data to be collected, how that data would be collected, stored and analysed, and the rights of the respondent. These documents would be walked through and afterwards, the researcher asked participants for their approval to participate on tape. Participants were given a copy of the written document, that had all the contact information of the researcher, so they could e-mail in case they had questions or concerns afterwards.

Among all forms of data collection in this study, work floor observations posed the greatest challenges with regard to informed consent. Written consent was deliberately avoided due to both ethical and practical considerations. In a sensitive and hierarchical setting like prison, formal consent forms may be perceived as intrusive or even threatening, especially when trust has not yet been established (van den Hoonaard, 2001). Moreover, as Bell (2014) and others argue, formal consent can create a false sense of ethical closure, protecting the researcher more than the participant (Haggerty, 2004; Wynn & Israel, 2018).

Given the ethnographic nature and extended duration of the fieldwork, consent was instead understood as an ongoing and dynamic process (Wynn & Israel, 2018). This approach aligned with the relational logic of the field and encouraged continuous ethical reflexivity – what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) term ethics in practice. It also addressed practical limitations: it was impossible to predetermine who would be observed, and requesting written consent from all staff and incarcerated individuals would have created an inappropriate burden. However, at the start of each observation, if there where new actors, the researcher would always introduce himself and the research. With regards to observations there was only one prison officer that declined my request to follow the shift on their unit, as they were not interested in participating. When there were incidents, the researcher would always ask if he was allowed to observe or come with the prison officer to the specific place were the incident was taking place.

B. Confidentiality

Research data were only available to the research team. This team consisted of the researcher of this thesis, his supervisors (i.e. prof. dr. Kristel Beyens, prof. dr. Miranda Boone and prof. dr. An-Sofie Vanhouche) and drs. Emilie Gossye who was part of the larger research project on jail craft in both countries, as her focus lays on comparing the training of prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The recordings of the interviews were, as soon as possible, transferred from the portable recorder to the researcher's laptop. In addition, they were stored on a secure SharePoint This is an online environment with strong security measures and strict access controls. These recordings were transcribed and only available to the members of the research team. After defence of the thesis, the transcriptions will be kept but the recordings deleted.

Work floor observation notes, which were often unintelligible without context anyway because the researcher used catchwords rather than whole sentences, unless if conversations were so valuable that they were written out as correctly as possible. Those notes were written out digitally, and again stored on the network drives.

Confidentiality is of importance not only during the data collection, but also in reporting the results. Several decisions were made to protect participants' confidentiality when reporting the findings. A first issue is whether or not to include the names of the prisons where the research took place. As is evident from the fact that they have up until now been referred to as 'prison A', 'prison B', 'prison C' and 'prison D', the decision was made to conceal these names. However, it is still quite possible to speculate on the names of these prisons using the information in this thesis. Since context is very important in comparative ethnographic research, a continuous trade-off needed to be made between including or omitting certain relevant characteristics of these prisons. For example, it was very relevant to include whether they were open or closed regime prison, remand prisons or prisons for sentenced individuals. Wherever the information was deemed important for the working experiences of the prison officers in this study, it was included. It was still decided not to explicitly disclose the names of prisons, however. The researcher was honest to participants about this fact: he mentioned that the prisons would not be explicitly named in the thesis, but that including certain context factors could still lead to identification of the prison by individuals who are knowledgeable about the Belgian and Dutch prison systems. Interestingly, most participants to whom the researcher mentioned this fact had been under the impression that the name of the prison would not be disclosed.

C. Dilemmas and reflections

The general ethical principles outlined above apply broadly to most empirical research. However, criminological fieldwork, and prison research in particular, raises a distinct set of challenges that warrant additional reflection. As Scott (2014, p. 31) notes, "the prison research process remains an ethical minefield where the researcher is likely to be confronted with a number of situationally specific moral dilemmas." Similarly, Jewkes (2014, p. 389) describes prisons as "intensely human environments," marked by acute ethical tensions, contradictions, and complexities. The following sections reflect on several such dilemmas encountered during the course of this study. They are presented with transparency and humility: not all challenges may have been resolved in an ideal manner, but acknowledging potential missteps is essential for fostering ethical awareness and enabling future researchers to make more informed choices. This reflective approach mirrors the ethos of the ethics training program underpinning this project, which emphasizes the co-construction of strategies to navigate ethical ambiguity – a practice especially vital in research that centrally engages with ethical dilemmas.

As has been reiterated throughout this thesis, prison officers are often distrustful of outsiders, including researchers (Beyens et al., 2015; Liebling et al., 2011; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk; 2023). Trust therefore needs to be negotiated between the researcher and the prison officers, which may cause several dilemmas. The first is related to the distrust between prison officers and management. In particular, some authors have warned other researchers to be wary of being seen as too close to management (Tournel, 2015; Tracy, 2004). In general, the researcher did not encounter many issues in this regard during the current study. There were however three major occasions where distrust against the researcher was expressed. Oddly enough, all three of these happened in the first prison, prison A. The first situation occurred during the end of a shift in prison A. A prison officer had the following to say:

> PO$^{\text{BE}}$: *"That reminds me. There's a rumour going around. People think that you're the nephew of 'Quickie' (i.e. then Minister of Justice, Vincent Van Quickenborne)."*
>
> Researcher: I look at the prison officer with a certain degree of surprise. I smile, and ask why the staff would think that.
>
> PO$^{\text{BE}}$*: "Because, in their eyes, just like him, you supposedly want to introduce major reforms. You always talk about the upcoming differentiation between prison officers. But don't take it too seriously, okay? I just wanted to let you know. Here in prison A, people gossip about everyone. You just come off as ambitious. A few colleagues think that you're secretly working for the Ministry of Justice."*
>
> Researcher: I tell him that, with a smile, as far as I know, I'm not related to "Quickie" – and I've yet to receive any job offer in the mail from the Ministry.

> PO^{BE}: *"Our instincts are pretty sharp when it comes to outsiders though, especially when it concerns our work."*
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observation, April 25, 2022)

The second situation took place when I went for a coffee in the intake unit for incarcerated persons.

> When I enter the intake unit of Block Two – the department responsible for receiving newly arrived incarcerated individuals – I notice that, in addition to the supervising officer of the unit, another, unfamiliar officer is present, looking at me with a somewhat agitated expression. I greet both officers politely and ask whether it would be alright for me to make a coffee. The supervising officer replies that I'm free to take whatever I need.
>
> As the coffee begins to brew, the other officer stands up and walks toward me. Suddenly, he is standing very close, pointing his finger as he says: *"Just because you're writing things down doesn't mean it's the truth. How long are you planning to hang around here, anyway?"*
>
> Somewhat startled, I respond quickly: *"Four to five months, depending on the differences between units and the kind of information I'm able to collect."*
>
> His reaction is curt: *"You won't know what you're talking about after four months. You'll never understand anything that we do".*
>
> I want to reply that I'm not merely observing, but that I'm specifically relying on the experience and perspectives of the people working here through interviews as well as observations. But before I can explain, the officer leaves the room.
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observation, May 11, 2022)

The third instance happened in Block One of prison A, almost at the end of data collection for this prison. A few days prior to the situation I had a quite long talk with a prison officer of the control post near the external services. At the time he seemed quite interested in the research and was rather open about his career in prison and his experiences. He even told me that he was writing a book on all the things that he went through while working as a prison officer. He even stated that he was willing to participate in the research. We agreed to a time and date that would work for him to do an interview, all seemed well. The day of our interview, the following happened:

> It is 3:15 PM. I leave the unit and head to the second floor to conduct an interview. Upon arrival, I ask whether we could move to a separate room for the conversation. *"A separate room? Why? Can't you just write here?"* he responds.
>
> I explain that I usually record the interview with a recorder so that I can later transcribe it in full. *"A recorder? You have a recorder with you? Oh, no. I don't want*

> *that. Absolutely not. You're just walking around with a recorder? Who gave you permission to do that?"*
>
> I explain that I've received authorization from DG EPI (i.e. Belgian prison service) as well as from the local prison management, and that I only use the recorder for interviews. I even take it out of my backpack to show that it is switched off.
>
> *"No, I don't want anything to do with that. If I had known you were walking around with that kind of equipment, I would never have agreed to speak with you. This interview is not going to happen."*
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observations, July 6, 2022)

The officer's strong reaction, and the complete loss of this interview opportunity, made me realise that, for some participants, the very presence of a recorder was perceived as intrusive, risky, or incompatible with their comfort level. From this point onwards, I began explicitly informing potential respondents, when asking about their interest in taking part in an interview, that interviews would be recorded, explaining why and how the recordings would be used, and that formal authorisation was obtained from the management for the use of this equipment. This heightened sensitivity to how my methods and interactions were perceived was not limited to the use of recording equipment. It also extended to the ways in which my contact with incarcerated persons was observed and interpreted by prison officers.

Contact with incarcerated persons made prison officers at times question my intent. In prison A it was not possible to have a one-on-one conversation with an incarcerated person. As prison units are stationed by a single prison officer, this never occurred to be possible. In prison B having a chat with an incarcerated person wasn't deemed as to be questioned, although multiple times some officers made the remark that I shouldn't believe everything I was told.

> After finishing a conversation with an incarcerated individual, I return to the officer's desk, he instantly turns to me and whispers: *"You do know what he's in for, right?"* I look at him and honestly tell him that I have no idea, not about him, nor about anyone currently held in this facility. He says: *"He's a first-class paedophile. I heard him telling you how hard he's got it in here. That everything is a problem. But he conveniently forgets why he's here in the first place. understand what I saying? Don't believe everything he tells you."*
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Observation, October 6, 2022)

This situation reinforced my awareness that my role as a researcher was subject to constant negotiation in the field. My contact with incarcerated persons was not simply an isolated interaction but part of a wider network of relationships continuously observed and interpreted by staff. Officers' comments about individuals' offences positioned me as someone who might be naïve or misled, implicitly inviting me to adopt the occupational perspective that frames incarcerated persons as untrustworthy narrators. In response,, I took greater care to register these perspectives, treating such comments as reflections of how staff perceive interactions with incarcerated persons that occur outside the boundaries of the occupational group.

In Prisons C and D, such remarks were never made following conversations with incarcerated individuals. While staff occasionally inquired, subtly, about the topics discussed, my reasons for conducting the informal conversations were never explicitly questioned. Throughout informal conversations, a recurring narrative did emerge in which incarcerated individuals were portrayed as inherently untrustworthy. This was consistently underscored by the use of the term *"boef"* (crook), serving as a linguistic reminder of who these individuals were perceived to be. In contrast, in some instances I was even encouraged to engage in conversation with incarcerated persons on the living unit, suggesting a more open attitude toward my presence and research activities.

While the process of building trust in the field was largely positive and often essential to gaining access, it also introduced ethical tensions, particularly when boundaries had to be asserted. Drawing such boundaries could feel uncomfortable, as it underscored the inherently instrumental nature of fieldwork: researchers cultivate rapport in order to collect data (Laverick, 2010; Wouters et al., 2014), often by deliberately engaging in the everyday routines and interactions of participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). This performative aspect of fieldwork has been described by Duncombe and Jessop (2012, p. 110) as "faking friendship," a term that aptly captures the ambivalence researchers may feel when navigating relationships that are both personally meaningful and professionally strategic.

These tensions became particularly visible in moments where personal connection intersected with professional boundaries. One such moment occurred when the researcher received a Facebook friend request from a prison officer who had been especially supportive during the observation period. Although the request resonated with the personal connection that had been built, accepting it risked appearing partial – particularly in a work context where staff relationships were known to be fractured. A compromise was proposed: the request could be accepted after the fieldwork had concluded. However, the officer eventually withdrew the request altogether.

Other boundary negotiations were more subtle. A gatekeeper, for example, requested the researcher's personal phone number in order to facilitate communication via WhatsApp. In this case, the researcher agreed, as it eased logistical coordination and did not involve disclosure of further personal details. Similarly, a few prison officers sent LinkedIn connection requests, which the researcher did accept during the research period. Unlike

Facebook, LinkedIn is oriented toward professional networking and thus did not carry the same implications of personal affiliation or bias.

Focusing specifically on prison officers brings additional risks. Researchers may, often inadvertently, become overly sympathetic to staff perspectives, thereby compromising analytical distance (Bennett et al., 2008). Sim (2008) criticizes what he terms a “sanitized penology” (p. 189), referring to studies that portray officers in unduly positive terms, while failing to account for how officer culture may harm both incarcerated individuals and more empathetic colleagues. In a similar vein, Scott (2015) urges researchers to remain attentive to the power dynamics of the carceral context and to centre the voices of those who are most affected by the system, primarily incarcerated persons.

While these concerns are particularly acute in research on prison staff, they reflect broader dilemmas that confront all ethnographic research in hierarchical and morally charged environments. As Liebling (2001) rightly contends, this should not be reduced to a binary. Researchers can, and arguably must, attend to multiple perspectives at once, holding space for both empathy and critique. In this study, the decision was made to focus primarily on prison officers, which inevitably introduced the risk of over-identification with staff narratives. To address this, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process, openly acknowledging the potential for bias and critically reflecting on moments where this risk emerged. By systematically noting my own reactions, assumptions, and positional shifts alongside observational data. Moments where potential bias emerged, such as staff questioning my interactions with incarcerated persons, were documented and treated as data in their own right. I then revisited these notes during analysis to ensure that staff perspectives, while central to the study, did not become the sole interpretive frame.

Regular dialogue with my academic supervisors, who were also bound by confidentiality, proved essential for maintaining analytical balance. These conversations took place throughout the research process, often immediately after field visits, and provided a space to discuss not only emerging findings but also my own positioning, assumptions, and emotional responses to the material. Supervisors challenged me to articulate the evidential basis for my interpretations, identify possible blind spots, and consider alternative explanations, which helped prevent over-identification with staff narratives.

An illustrative example of the value of such dialogue occurred after a feedback session with the prison management, in which parts of the preliminary findings were perceived as unflattering to the institution. During this meeting, the governor nonetheless acknowledged the accuracy of the observations and confirmed that they reflected genuine institutional realities.

Discussing this feedback with my supervisors reinforced two key points: first, that critical observations can be both uncomfortable and credible to those working within the system; and second, that critical findings could still be received as fair and accurate when they were grounded in careful, evidence-based observation. It also reminded me that the goal was not to avoid uncomfortable truths, but to present them in a way that participants could recognise as reflecting their lived reality, even when the implications were challenging for the institution.

Prison research, as Liebling (1999) asserts, is rarely devoid of emotion. Rather than being incidental, emotions are often a constitutive element of fieldwork and deserve explicit attention. Jewkes (2014) similarly emphasizes the need to better prepare new researchers for the emotional dimensions of conducting prison research, arguing that the absence of such preparation risks doing them a disservice. At the same time, scholars like Crewe (2014) caution against overemphasizing emotional experiences, noting their inherent subjectivity and potential to distort findings. Both perspectives hold merit. On the one hand, emotions may complicate objectivity; on the other, recognizing their presence can foster a greater degree of reflexive transparency, particularly in lone research settings where external checks are limited. Moreover, as Liebling (1999) suggests, emotions should not merely be seen as obstacles to be managed, but as valuable data in themselves, offering insight into the dynamics of the field and the researcher's positionality within it.

Garrihy and Watters (2020) contend that emotional experiences in prison fieldwork are not merely inevitable, but fundamentally entangled with the researcher's embodied presence and agentic position within the field. Emotions are not incidental responses to difficult situations; rather, they are integral to how researchers are positioned, perceived, and legitimated in carceral spaces. Their study highlights how researchers engage in forms of emotional labour to navigate credibility, maintain professional boundaries, and negotiate their standing within complex institutional hierarchies. These emotional dynamics are highly context-dependent and shaped by power asymmetries – both between researchers and participants, and within the broader prison environment. This is particularly salient in ethnographic work, where access, trust, and legitimacy are continuously earned, questioned, and renegotiated. In such settings, emotions do not simply accompany fieldwork, they also actively mediate the research process itself.

In this study, negative emotions during data collection emerged most acutely in moments of failure to recruit custodial staff for interviews, institutional resistance, and personal isolation. Fieldwork conducted alone, particularly during extended overnight stays near the prison, often led to feelings of loneliness. Occasional rejection of interview requests – though infrequent – and last-minute changes to carefully observations during particular activities, generated significant stress. A particularly recurring source of frustration involved arriving at the prison, only to be informed that, due to understaffing or an incident, the activity wouldn't be able to go through. Such disruptions, as Garrihy and Watters (2020) argue, do more than merely unsettle the researcher emotionally; they also compromise focus, diminish analytical sharpness, and disrupt the rhythm of engagement. What proved crucial in managing these pressures was the ability to debrief regularly with a trusted research team. As Liebling (1999) aptly reminds us, researchers are not solely criminologists, they are also human beings. Acknowledging this dual identity, rather than attempting to suppress it, is essential for navigating the affective complexities of prison ethnography. That the researcher would be confronted with this on the very first day of fieldwork was, in all honesty, not anticipated. On the day of my initial introduction to the gatekeeper, a structured tour of the prison's distinct units was arranged, along with the formulation of a detailed observation schedule outlining which activities would be observed and at what times. Halfway through, my gatekeeper was called away to assist in a check on one of the high-security cells, and since I had nowhere else to go, she asked me if I would tag along. The abruptness of the moment, and the intensity of what followed, made it a heavy and sobering start to the research (fictional names :

> The PO^{BE}'s walkie-talkie crackled to life: a call came through asking her to accompany the unit director to the isolation cell. She turned to me and asked quietly, "You think you handle this?" I wasn't quite sure what "this" meant, so I asked what exactly I'd be seeing. "Right now, we've got [name of incarcerated person] in isolation. She's a young woman with very severe psychiatric problems. She hurts herself… in quite unusual ways."
>
> I asked her what kind of self-harm she meant. "She doesn't just swallow sharp objects, She also puts small items, pebbles for instance, into her urethra and genitals. In the isolation cell, she's even scraped paint off the walls to use. She's done it so many times that there's permanent damage now. I couldn't tell you how often we've had to take her to the hospital."
>
> I asked why she isn't in a forensic psychiatric centre (FPC). The PO^{BE} shook her head. "Because they can't deal with her either. They say she's too dangerous. The staff don't know what to do with her, so they send her back to us. But we're not trained for this."
>
> Before heading down to isolation, we stopped by the unit director's office. She would be coming with us. "What you're about to see is hardcore," the unit director said bluntly. My gatekeeper, the unit director, another PO^{BE}, and myself walked down the stairwell toward the ground floor. On the way, the unit director spoke again. "We're trying hard to get her placed in an FPC," she explained, "but they're not cooperating. It's like mopping with the tap open. And even if we manage to place her, she'll be back within days."

> We stopped in front of Isolation Cell B. They unlocked the first door large, then we stepped into a small, warm space. The second door was partly made of reinforced glass. As it opened, I instinctively moved back a little, observing while staying out of the way by not entering the cell, but I could still see clearly that someone was laying there.
>
> A young woman was lying on a mattress strapped into a full restraint harness, her arms, legs, and torso secured tightly. The mattress itself rested on a raised concrete platform, about a meter high and two meters long. On both ends of the platform, about ten centimetres off the ground, were notches where the straps were fastened. Her limbs could barely move. She couldn't turn her body at all.
>
> Her face showed clear signs of injury: abrasions on the left side of her jaw and a wound at the hairline of her forehead. Her left hand was badly swollen and discoloured. I glanced at the state the cell. The walls were completely bare. A single rectangular window, high up just under the ceiling, let in some daylight, though it was far too high to see anything outside. A PO^{BE} pointed to a patch on the wall. "That's where she scraped off paint," she said.
>
> I stepped a bit closer without entering the cell, trying to catch the exchange between the staff and the woman. She mumbled something about pain in her lower abdomen but struggled to articulate clearly. She seemed heavily sedated. The unit director responded that she had already received painkillers and that no further medication could be given at that moment. "We'd like to take off the restraints," she added, "but you'll just hurt yourself again."
>
> One of the PO^{BE} bent down to check whether the straps were too tight, then offered the woman some water, holding the cup to her mouth so she could drink.
>
> Staff were in the cell for less than two minutes.
>
> On the way back to the care unit office, a PO^{BE} looked over at me and asked gently, "You alright?" I admitted that I did not expect to see something so intense. "Yeah," she said, "it's heartbreaking, isn't it?"
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observation, March 9, 2022)

Although ethical research practices were actively pursued, this particular moment challenged this stance immediately upon the first day of fieldwork. In this case, I was accompanying staff on what I understood to be a general tour of the facility, without prior knowledge of what situations I might encounter. When the opportunity arose to follow the unit director and staff to the isolation cell, I was unaware beforehand of the nature or severity of the circumstances in which this incarcerated person was in. This moment illustrates a broader challenge in prison ethnography: researchers can become enveloped in unfolding operational routines that may place them in ethically sensitive situations without prior briefing or informed consent from all those involved. In this moment, my dual responsibilities, to protect participants' privacy and to observe institutional realities, came into tension. Even if the intention of my presence to the isolation cell was grounded in an early attempt to build rapport with staff and collecting data about the research environment, it nonetheless meant being physically present during a highly vulnerable moment for the individual concerned. This situation made clear to me that, despite careful planning, prison fieldwork often requires rapid ethical decision-making, and that the boundaries between observation and intrusion can become blurred when events unfold unexpectedly. In prison ethnography, access is not only a methodological asset but also an ethical responsibility, requiring constant vigilance to ensure that the pursuit of data does not come at the expense of the dignity and well-being of those observed. Following this experience, I only accompanied staff later when she was being taken to the yard for outdoor time, and no longer when she was receiving medical or physical care.

4 Differentiated Prison Officer Work

This chapter examines how legislative, structural, and cultural mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape the construction of prison officers' occupational identities, and how these identities are perceived by officers themselves. It does so through a comparative analysis of the two systems, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and legislative documents. The focus is on three interrelated dimensions. First, the legislative frameworks that formally codify prison officers' responsibilities and professional boundaries, setting the parameters within which identities can be constructed. Second, the structural arrangements of prison work, including staffing models, role differentiation, and task allocation, which operationalise these legislative frameworks and establish the organisational contexts in which officers perform their duties. Third, the cultural norms, values, and informal practices that influence how officers interpret and perceive these roles on a daily basis, and how they respond to the structural and legislative constraints under which they operate. By analysing these dimensions together, the chapter seeks to examine the generative mechanisms through which occupational identity is constructed and maintained in both counties, highlighting both convergences and divergences in officers' experiences and perceptions.

4.1 PRISON OFFICER ROLES COMPARED

Prison officers are integral to maintaining safety, order, and humane conditions within correctional facilities. However, the official job and role descriptions of prison officers vary significantly between the two countries in this study. These official descriptions reflect the operational principles that staff are expected to implement in practice. In order to compare and understand the jail craft utilized among prison officers in both countries, it is first necessary to conduct a detailed comparison of their roles and responsibilities. The first step is an analysis of the applicable regulations and policies, followed by an examination of how these differences are addressed in practice. This comparison thus focuses on PO^{BE} in Belgium and the PO^{NL} and SO^{NL} in the Netherlands, highlighting key distinctions in their tasks and functions, based on legislation.

4.1.1 Custodial Roles in Belgium

To understand the current role of Belgian prison officers (i.e. penitentiaire bewakingsassistenten (PO^{BE}) – it is essential to revisit the Ministerial Decree of 1971, the *Algemene Instructie* (General Instruction, hereafter G.I.). The G.I. codified the duties and responsibilities of custodial staff along hierarchical lines: chief guard, quarter guard, shift supervisor, senior guard, and guard. It also differentiated between the *guards* and *porters* (Art. 38-39 G.I.), although the latter was not a distinct occupational category but a temporary assignment drawn from the general pool of guards. While this should not be mistaken for formal job differentiation as later introduced in the Netherlands, it reveals early tendencies to divide labour according to function and security focus.

Within the custodial hierarchy, shift supervisors (*eerstaanwezende bewaarders*) occupied a pivotal intermediary position. They operated under the authority of the chief guard (*hoofdbewaarder*) and, in some cases, the quarter supervisor (*kwartierchef*). According to *Art. 36 G.I.*, they could be temporarily assigned to lead a quarter or section, assuming the corresponding duties and authority of that function. In practice, this meant that their responsibilities shifted dynamically depending on institutional needs, a flexible arrangement reflecting the operational logic of the time.

The duties of guards and senior guards were detailed in *Art. 38 G.I.*, encompassing the maintenance of order, cleanliness, and safety within the institution. Their work included inspecting cells, distributing meals and work materials, conducting roll calls, supervising prisoner movements and activities, and responding to emergencies. They were also responsible for daily observation of prisoners' physical and moral condition and were expected to report relevant information through the chain of command. These were primarily operational and custodial duties, the core routines through which discipline and security were maintained on a daily basis.

In contrast, the porter's role (*Art. 39 G.I.*) was oriented toward perimeter security and access control, involving minimal contact with prisoners. Porters managed entry and exit points, verified identities and authorisations, inspected vehicles and goods, prevented irregular releases, and maintained detailed registers such as visitor logs and attendance records. Their tasks were procedural and preventive, designed to safeguard the institution from external breaches rather than to oversee internal order.

Beyond these specific tasks, all custodial personnel shared overarching ethical and professional obligations (*Art. 41 G.I.*). They were required to enforce regulations fairly, treat incarcerated persons humanely, and maintain professional distance. Officers were expected to remain attentive to the moral and physical well-being of those under their supervision, to foster cooperation conducive to reintegration, and to report incidents or irregularities promptly through hierarchical channels. These provisions highlight that even in 1971, Belgian prison regulations articulated a moral dimension to custodial work, one that extended beyond mere surveillance and control.

Taken together, the G.I. reveals an early functional segmentation of custodial work between those maintaining internal order (*guards and senior guards*) and those ensuring external security (*porters*). While both contributed to the overall stability of the prison, their duties reflected distinct operational logics: one relational and inmate-oriented, the other procedural and facility-oriented. Despite this division, the decree framed all positions within a single ethical and institutional order, foreshadowing later debates about role differentiation and professionalism within the Belgian prison service.

The Ministerial Decree of 1971, the General Instruction, remains a key document for understanding the current role of Belgian prison officers (PO^{BE}s). Since its implementation, the position of guard has undergone two name changes, but these changes did not bring any additional duties, responsibilities, or substantive requirements regarding the tasks or methods expected of PO^{BE}s. These name changes, enacted through Royal Decrees, primarily influenced the professional classification levels and pay scales of the role at the governmental level. For example, the Royal Decree of June 23, 1995, redefined the title of "guard" as *penitentiair beambte* (penitentiary officer/PB), and the Royal Decree of November 12, 2009, further revised it to *penitentiair bewakingsassistent* (prison guard assistant/PO^{BE}). While this latest title change introduced a secondary school diploma requirement for the role of prison officer, it lacked a corresponding philosophy that reflected the complexity of the position. As Tournel (2015, p.30) observed, the new designation unequivocally emphasizes "surveillance," while the actual work of prison officers is far more complex and extends beyond merely "monitoring" incarcerated persons.

A clear legislative philosophy is evident in the enactment and publication of the Basic Law on the Prison System and the Legal Status of Incarcerated persons of 2005. This legislation outlines the objectives and fundamental principles of sentence execution while codifying various rights of detained individuals. However, the Basic Law notably excludes organizational specifics, such as the management of prisons and personnel (Final Report, Commission for the Basic Law, 2001: 122-124). As Tournel (2015) observes, it can be argued that prison officers are implicitly expected to contribute to achieving the broader objectives of sentence enforcement. Nevertheless, the Basic Law falls short of providing a detailed or systematic account of their specific responsibilities. Instead, it focuses on overarching goals, including rehabilitation, reintegration, and the reduction of detention harm. These objectives are encapsulated in Article 9, §2 of the Basic Law, which states:

> "The execution of the custodial sentence is aimed at restoring the injustice caused by the offense to the victims, rehabilitating the convicted person, and preparing their individualized reintegration into free society."

While the Basic Law refrains from outlining the specific tasks of Belgian prison officers, it does provide guidance on how order and security should be upheld. Notably, it introduces the concept of dynamic security, which emphasizes the importance of "constructive relationships" between prison staff and detained persons as a mechanism to ensure safety (art. 105, §1 Basic Act; Dunbar, 1985; Coyle, 2005). The introduction of dynamic security has been critiqued by some scholars for creating inherent tensions in the role of prison officers, who are simultaneously expected to enforce control based on constant vigilance and mistrust while fostering relationships grounded in mutual respect and trust (Chauvenet et al., 1994; De Waele & Depreeuw, 1985; Farkas, 1999; Froment, 1998; Snacken, 1999; Syr, 1996). However, other studies posit that these dual expectations are not necessarily contradictory and can be reconciled within the professional practice of prison officers (Liebling & Price, 2001; Liebling et al., 2011; Nylander et al., 2011; Snacken et al., 2000; Tait, 2011). The Basic Law underscores this premise, articulating dynamic security as follows:

> "Maintaining order and security implies a dynamic interaction between prison staff and incarcerated persons on one hand, and a balanced relationship between the technical means employed and a constructive detention regime on the other. The obligations and restrictions imposed on incarcerated persons to maintain order and security must, in terms of their nature and duration, be proportionate to these objectives" (Art. 105, §1 Basic Law).

This approach emphasizes the interplay between technical security measures and the cultivation of constructive interactions, positioning dynamic security as a foundational element of contemporary prison management. In Belgium, PO^{BE}'s thus serve as the cornerstone of supervision and security. This dual focus makes the PO^{BE} role both versatile and demanding, which is reflected in the official job and role description for PO^{BE}'s as presented in a recent job posting in Belgium:

> "As a penitentiary guard assistant, you contribute to creating a humane and secure environment for incarcerated persons, your colleagues, and visitors. As the primary point of contact for incarcerated persons, you play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful detention and a smooth reintegration into society. You guide detainees from their arrival to their release. Detainees can always turn to you with questions or if they need a listening ear. If you cannot assist them directly, you ensure they are referred to the appropriate person. In crisis situations, you are ready to support your colleagues swiftly. You observe and supervise visits, outdoor walks, and other activities. You oversee special activities for certain groups of detainees, such as individuals with psychological disorders. In addition, you are responsible for various security tasks: Monitoring access for staff, visitors, and detainees. Conducting searches of detainees and inspecting living areas as necessary. Reporting suspicious activities and violations. Inspecting security systems and reporting any defects. Operating call and camera systems, electric doors, and other technical installations."[1]

---

[1] Consulted at: https://werkenvoor.be/nl/jobs/ang21454-penitentiair-bewakingsassistent-voor-de-gevangenis-van-beveren-mvx

The legal division of tasks outlined in the General Instruction (G.I.) of 1971 is no longer evident in subsequent documents or legislation pertaining to Prison Guard Assistants (PO^{BE}s). More specifically, the Penitentiary Act of 2019 regards the role of the PO^{BE} as a comprehensive position encompassing a broad range of responsibilities within the penitentiary system. This characterization aligns to some extent with historical practices, as PO^{BE}s and their predecessors were required to perform both guarding and porter tasks. However, the G.I. reflected a clear differentiation in the focus of these roles, even though guards and porters did not constitute formally distinct groups. Despite this lack of formal distinction, the G.I. established a basic framework for the potential division of responsibilities into two separate roles. Prior to this, prison officers were expected to perform both the security/custodial and interactional aspects of the role, even if the latter was often less formalised and received less institutional emphasis. The 2019 Penitentiary Act reintroduces this conceptual groundwork by proposing the restructuring of the PO^{BE} role into two distinct professional categories, inspired by the Dutch model. This proposed division seeks to address contemporary needs by allocating static security tasks to a separate professional category, as is the practice in the Netherlands. In this respect, the intent of the 2019 Act partially aligns with the division of tasks envisaged in the 1971 G.I., albeit with differences in execution.

> *"The aim is to further differentiate the multifunctional roles of surveillance and technical staff, allowing each to develop according to their specific nature. The overlap of surveillance, supervisory, and technical or logistical tasks is now considered outdated. Investment is required in the continued professionalization of these roles, which inevitably translates into functional differentiation."* (Draft Bill, 2018, p.12)

4.1.2 Custodial Roles in the Netherlands

The Netherlands, in contrast, has long employed a more specialized approach by dividing prison officer roles into two distinct categories: SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL} (Kommer, 1991). The historical origins of the functional division in the Netherlands can be traced back to the foundational policy documents underlying the memorandum '*Taak en Toekomst*' (Task and Future)(Ministerie van Justitie, 1982), where a more detailed understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the PO^{NL} can be articulated. The *Working Group on the Prison Guard Function* stated in its 1981 report that the term "guidance" (bejegenen) encapsulates the essence of the PO^{NL} role (Commissie Van den Oever, 1981, p. 14). According to the working group, this guidance could manifest in various ways depending on the context. In daily interactions, the focus is primarily on care, defined as "material provision, corrective actions, addressing and referring unresolved issues, crisis intervention, and reporting" (Commissie Van den Oever, 1981, p.16). These "artificial distinctions" within the core task are tools that the PO^{NL} was expected to use to create an environment within the living unit centred on enabling the incarcerated person to “be as much themselves as possible, thereby taking on more responsibility for how they structure their daily life within the unit” (Commissie Van den Oever, 1981, p.16).

These forms of guidance, as highlighted by the working group at the time, required what it termed the “basic attitude” of the PO^{NL}. This attitude included openness toward incarcerated persons, situational judgment, social stability, and resistance to prejudice. The omission of “security” from this list was intentional. The working group regarded security, along with task delineation between roles and the institution’s focus on individual- or group-oriented policies, as the overarching framework within which substantive work occurs. These frameworks, essential for both detained persons and staff, are not seen as constraints but rather as “rules of the game” that support the PO^{NL} in fulfilling their duties. These duties involve interacting with incarcerated persons in various ways, overseeing the boundaries that structure their daily lives in prison, assisting with the resolution of everyday issues, and intervening when those boundaries are crossed (Kommer, 1991).

The *Memorandum on a Revised Standardized Institutional Structure and the Function of Institutional Worker* (DGW, 1981) builds on the working group’s report but emphasizes different aspects. For example, the memorandum organizes tasks into three categories: security, interaction, and guidance. Here, security is defined as “not only preventing escape but also ensuring orderly and controllable operations”, interaction as “the humane way of dealing with incarcerated persons”, which the working group calls the basic attitude, and guidance as “the substantive tasks of the PO^{NL} aimed at achieving detention objectives, particularly preparing detained persons for reintegration into society” (DGW, 1981, p. 11). The memorandum *Werkzame Detentie* of 1994 (Ministerie van Justitie, 1994) also marked a significant departure from its predecessor, the memorandum *Taak en Toekomst* of 1982. The earlier memorandum focused on a humane approach to detention, prioritizing the humane execution of imprisonment, minimizing its harmful effects, and preparing incarcerated persons for reintegration into society. In contrast, the 1994 memorandum shifted its focus to three core principles: safety, human dignity, and efficiency. A key distinction between the two documents is the increased emphasis on safety, particularly security, in the later memorandum. This shift reflects a broader rebalancing of priorities within detention policy, with safety and retribution taking on a more central role. Additionally, the 1994 memorandum’s focus on efficiency introduced a more conditional approach to guidance (bejegening), where activities, including those aimed at resocialization, were offered exclusively to those who demonstrated motivation and willingness to participate (Kommer, 2018).

The manner of guidance provided by PO^{NL} (Residential Prison Officer Netherlands) in the context of the 1994 memorandum *Werkzame Detentie* reflects both a continuation and a significant evolution of earlier principles. The concept of "guidance" (bejegening) was central to the role of PO^{NL} as articulated in the earlier *Taak en Toekomst* memorandum and associated reports, emphasizing the PO^{NL} responsibility to foster an environment conducive to incarcerated persons' personal responsibility and reintegration into society. From the broader, more inclusive focus on care and reintegration in *Taak en Toekomst*, the emphasis shifted to a more targeted and efficiency-driven model in *Werkzame Detentie*. PO^{NL} were tasked not only with maintaining a humane and structured environment but also with identifying and engaging detained persons who actively sought rehabilitation and those who did not, within a framework that increasingly prioritized security and orderly operations. This nuanced approach underscored the more dual role of PO^{NL} as facilitators of reintegration and agents of institutional order.

In 2008, the Dutch policy program Modernising the Prison Service (Modernisering Gevangeniswezen (MGW)) further developed the person-centred approach that was already embedded within the efficiency goals outlined in the 1994 memorandum (Kommer, 2018; Ministerie van Justitie, 2008). Key aspects of this elaboration include emphasizing the detained persons personal responsibility and introducing the concept of motivational guidance (motiverende bejegening) for PO^{NL}. This concept requires Dutch prison officers to interact with detained persons in a manner that encourages them to work towards a future free of criminal behaviour. The approach is concretely applied through the implementation of five core values: respect, human dignity, trust, support, and interaction (Kommer, 2018). Motivational guidance (motiverende bejegening) is also understood as a conversational technique used by PO^{NL} in their mentor role to encourage detained persons to express change-oriented language (considering change), make decisions (choosing change), and take action (undertaking change-related steps) (Molleman, Leeuw & Bogaerts, 2012). In their mentoring role, the PO^{NL} reminds the detained person of their personal commitment to ceasing criminal behaviour and encourages them to make constructive use of their time in detention.

With the increasing emphasis on retribution in the Dutch penitentiary system, the Promote and Demote system (*Promoveren en Degraderen*) was introduced in 2014 (Molleman, 2021). This development has further elevated the importance of the PO^{NL} mentor's role in observing and assessing detained persons behaviour. Although this system initially applied only to internal privileges, such as placement in a basic or plus program, it was expanded in 2021 with the introduction of the Punishment and Protection Act (Wet Straffen en Beschermen). This expansion linked the granting of external privileges to the demonstration of desirable behaviour during detention (Elbers, 2024). Decisions regarding these privileges are partially, though not exclusively, based on behavioural reports provided by PO^{NL}.

Every six weeks, a multidisciplinary committee (*Multidisciplinair Overlegorgaan*, or MDO) evaluates whether the criteria for promotion have been met, though additional assessments may occur if circumstances require. The final decision regarding promotion, demotion, or continued placement within the current regime rests with the prison governor, in accordance with Article 1d of the Regulation on Selection, Placement and Transfer of Prisoners (RSPOG).

The RSPOG (2014) outlines a behavioural framework that categorizes conduct into levels, including 'green' (positive), 'red' (negative), and – until its discontinuation in October 2020 – 'orange' (suboptimal but not immediately sanctionable). Green behaviour reflects compliance with expectations, such as active cooperation with daily routines and an openness to abandoning criminal patterns. Orange behaviour refers to traits like emotional volatility or failure to take accountability, which do not warrant demotion but are nevertheless discouraged. Red behaviour includes more serious infractions, such as deliberate environmental disruption or physical aggression towards others, and may result in a return to the Basic regime.

Over the years, the concept of *bejegenen* (guidance) has undergone significant reinterpretation, becoming increasingly instrumentalized. In 2012, the RSJ (*Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming*) revisited the question of what constitutes good guidance (*goed bejegenen)* for penitentiary staff. The RSJ defined *bejegenen* as encompassing all aspects of the execution of a sentence or measure. These aspects were subsequently categorized into one fundamental principle and eight core principles. The fundamental principle asserts that treatment must be "good", which obliges the government, ranging from regulatory frameworks to practical implementation, and thus PO^{NL}, to remain consistently vigilant in identifying and addressing situations where quality, proper conduct, and human dignity may be compromised. The core principles elaborate on this and include: The principal of respectful interactions; the principle of emphasizing the quality of daily treatment; The principle of perspective, reintegration, and aftercare; The principle of legitimate or lawful execution, ensuring all measures adhere to legal and ethical standards; The principle of meaningful programming, offering incarcerated persons constructive activities that support rehabilitation; The principle of safety, prioritizing both physical and psychological security for incarcerated persons and staff; The principle of individualization, tailoring treatment to the specific needs and circumstances of each incarcerated person; The principle of minimal restrictions, limiting constraints to what is strictly necessary for safety and order; and The principle of citizenship, fostering a sense of responsibility and engagement with societal norms. These principles provide a comprehensive framework for good guidance, balancing the humane execution of detention with its rehabilitative and societal goals (RSJ, 2012).

These principles not only define the framework for humane and rehabilitative detention but also underpin the daily practices and responsibilities of PO^{NL}. An examination of a PO^{NL} job description today reveals that only a few of these principles are translated into concrete tasks and duties:

> "As a PO^{NL} you play a central role in both security and incarcerated person rehabilitation. You are tasked with structuring the daily routines of detainees and encouraging behaviour that supports their eventual reintegration into society. Acting as a mentor, you provide individualized guidance, foster stability and resocialization. Alongside these rehabilitative efforts, you maintain order and safety within the facility by intervening in conflicts, conducting inspections, and carrying out drug testing. Administrative duties, such as preparing reports and assessments, are also a crucial part of your responsibilities."[2]

The introduction of a more specialized prison officer also brought about the establishment of a new role within the Dutch penitentiary landscape, aimed at fulfilling positions that were not directly related to detained persons. They were tasked with addressing security vulnerabilities regarding the outer walls of the prisons and the movements of people and goods (Kommer, 1991). Initially, these tasks were limited in scope; however, over time, this group began to take on roles where direct interaction with incarcerated persons became possible, as illustrated in the following job description for SO^{NL}'s:

> "Monitoring and ensuring safety, these are your primary responsibilities as a complex security officer within a prison, also referred to as a Penitentiary Institution (PI). Using cameras, you oversee the entire facility, both inside and outside. Visitor areas, common spaces, and incarcerated person units: you safeguard security and intervene when necessary. Sometimes this involves working from the central control room; other times, it requires your physical presence. Key responsibilities include: Ensuring safety within and around the prison facility. Escorting incarcerated persons to appointments within the prison premises. Registering and verifying visitors, such as family members, lawyers, and probation officers. Responding to emergencies, such as conflicts between incarcerated persons."[3]

The roles of SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL} differ markedly in their scope and focus, as outlined in their job descriptions. SO^{NL}s are primarily tasked with maintaining safety and procedural order within the prison, focusing on operational security through activities like surveillance, access control, and escorting incarcerated persons to appointments. Their interaction with incarcerated persons is limited to logistical and situational contexts, intervening during emergencies such as conflicts. This role centres on upholding the prison's safety infrastructure with little emphasis on interpersonal or rehabilitative responsibilities. PO^{NL}, on the other hand, fulfil a dual role that integrates security tasks with rehabilitative efforts. While they also ensure order and conduct safety-related inspections, their responsibilities extend to mentoring incarcerated persons, structuring daily routines, and fostering behaviour conducive to reintegration into society. PO^{NL} take an active role in guiding incarcerated persons through individualized support, contributing to resocialization efforts. Their duties also include administrative work, such as preparing reports and assessments, reflecting a more multifaceted role within the prison system. The primary distinction between the two roles lies in their engagement with incarcerated persons. SO^{NL}s focus on maintaining external safety and operational order, while PO^{NL} combine these duties with fostering personal development and long-term rehabilitation. This dual focus enables PO^{NL} to address both immediate security needs and broader behavioural change, offering a more holistic approach to incarcerated person management compared to the more security-oriented responsibilities of SO^{NL}s.

---

[2] https://www.werkenvoornederland.nl/vacatures/penitentiair-inrichtingswerker-DJI-2025-2352

[3] https://www.werkenvoornederland.nl/vacatures/complexbeveiliger-DJI-2025-2674?utm

4.1.3 Custodial Roles Compared

Based on the official descriptions of prison officers roles in both countries, it could be asserted that PO^{BE}s shares similarities with both PO^{NL} and SO^{NL} but also displays distinct differences that set it apart. The PO^{BE}-role is a hybrid position that combines elements of security and incarcerated person engagement, but it lacks the deep rehabilitative focus of the PO^{NL} role while being more incarcerated person-centred than the largely security-oriented SO^{NL} role. Belgian PO^{BE}s are not involved in reintegration efforts, as this responsibility is predominantly entrusted to the Psychosocial Service (PSD) and the Department of Assistance and Services to Incarcerated persons (Flemish Community). In contrast, PO^{NL} play an active role in conducting behavioural assessments and subsequently contribute to the reintegration of incarcerated persons within the framework of the promote-and-demote system. Like SO^{NL}s, however, PO^{BE}s are responsible for ensuring safety and order within the prison. This includes monitoring access, conducting searches, and reporting suspicious activities, as well as handling technical security operations such as managing call and camera systems. These tasks align with the procedural and operational focus of SO^{NL}s, emphasizing safety and logistical management. However, PO^{BE}s go beyond these tasks by engaging more directly with incarcerated persons on a daily basis. PO^{BE}s also overlap with PO^{NL} in their interpersonal engagement and incarcerated person support. They serve as the primary point of contact for detained persons, offering guidance from arrival to release, and provide emotional support by listening to incarcerated persons' concerns or redirecting them to the appropriate resources. PO^{BE}s also observe and supervise activities, including specialized programs for certain groups, such as individuals with psychological disorders. Based on the analysis of the policy documents above, these elements align with the PO$^{\text{NL}}$' rehabilitative role, but the PO$^{\text{BE}}$'s duties in this regard are less structured and intensive. Unlike PO$^{\text{NL}}$, PO$^{\text{BE}}$s are not explicitly tasked with fostering behavioural change, structuring incarcerated persons' daily routines, or contributing to long-term resocialization and reintegration efforts. The key distinction lies in the depth and balance of responsibilities. PO$^{\text{BE}}$s operate as generalists, blending security tasks with incarcerated person engagement and support, but without the focused rehabilitative mandate that characterizes PO$^{\text{NL}}$. Similarly, while PO$^{\text{BE}}$s share security responsibilities with SO$^{\text{NL}}$s, their role places greater emphasis on incarcerated person interaction and support. This positions PO$^{\text{BE}}$s as intermediaries between the purely custodial responsibilities of SO$^{\text{NL}}$s and the dual rehabilitative-security focus of PO$^{\text{NL}}$, fulfilling a versatile but less specialized function within the prison system.

4.2 Differentiation in Practice

Prison officers operate at the interface between policy and practice, where abstract regulations are translated into daily routines, interactions, and decisions. They hold considerable power to either enhance or undermine the primary objectives of the institutions they work in (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). As street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), they are tasked not only with ensuring order and security, but also with enacting the 'caring' and supporting aims of the prison system. How these responsibilities are distributed, or split, across different roles can shape officers' sense of purpose, their connection with incarcerated persons, and their capacity to anticipate and manage risks (Nylander, 2011). When prison officers lack faith in the effectiveness or feasibility of institutional models, they may resist or subvert these policies, choosing instead to act in ways they perceive as more practical or necessary (Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, 2024). When asked about function differentiation, Belgian prison officers repeatedly expressed concerns by highlighting the fragmentation of responsibilities and an erosion of the role and function of prison officers, which they believe could be more effectively managed through a unified role, as is more commonly practiced in Belgium and aligns with their understanding of the profession. A Belgian prison officer stated it as follows:

> "I actually think it's important to perform both roles. Working on the landing allows you to get to know the detainees. You can't assess risks if you do not know 'who's who'. For example, tensions might be building between detainees. If you're always just doing camera surveillance, you won't notice these dynamics. However, by being present on the landing every now and then, you'll be more aware of what to watch out for, allowing you to anticipate potential issues."
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO$^{\text{BE}}$, March 10, 2022)

4.2.1 From Unified Roles to Functional Separation

In his ethnographic study on prison staff in Dutch prisons, Kommer (1991) also questioned the introduction of a prison officer differentiation model within the prison system. He argued against the permanent assignment of non-incarcerated persons-related positions to SO^{NL}'s. Instead, he suggested redistributing these non-incarcerated person-related duties among the existing PO^{NL} teams. This approach, he argued, would ensure greater task variety for PO^{NL}, maintaining their integral involvement in both incarcerated persons-focused and general institutional operations. By opposing the complete transfer of these roles to SO^{NL}'s, Kommer underscored the importance of preserving the PO^{NL} versatility and comprehensive engagement in the institution's functioning. He also aligned with Blokland (1974) in emphasizing the importance of "relief posts" as a means to manage the intensity of work on the units, as it reflects an understanding of the occupational demands and the need for thoughtful management of prison officer wellbeing. However, the system of job differentiation has been implemented in the Netherlands for over three decades since the study of Kommer (1991). In the contemporary Dutch penitentiary landscape, staff are entirely accustomed to the presence of two distinct groups of prison officers. The fear of fragmentation, as perceived by Belgian prison officers, contrasts sharply with how their Dutch counterparts interpret the arrangement. On the one hand, it is viewed as an opportunity for career development; on the other hand, it represents a logical framework for being recognized as a skilled professional in the role of a prison officer.

> "You have all these procedures and work instructions… you have to fine-tune them over the years. You inevitably encounter situations where things don't align perfectly. So, adjustments are made, and I spent roughly 3.5 years as a SO^{NL} doing exactly that. It was mainly static security, there was virtually no contact with detainees. My role primarily involved perimeter security and responding to alarms as they arise. That is truly how I experienced it: as a very static environment but also as an excellent training ground for becoming a PO^{NL}."
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 1)

This is what Bourdieu (1980, p.66) referred to as gaining a "feel for the game". In this context, the "game" refers to the complex and dynamic environment of the prison, where officers must operate within a structured framework of rules and procedures. However, as the officer notes, real-world situations often fail to align perfectly with these formal guidelines. Through repeated exposure to these challenges, officers argue that they develop an understanding of how to act effectively within their environment. This process involves internalizing the "rules of the game" while learning to navigate its exceptions, something that cannot be fully captured in written manuals or work instructions. The officer's account of fine-tuning procedures and adapting to unforeseen circumstances demonstrates this development. The SO^{NL} role, though static, provided a controlled environment where the officer could build their situational judgment and responsiveness, ultimately preparing them for the more interactive and complex responsibilities of a PO^{NL}. In order to develop 'practical mastery' as a Dutch prison officer (Bourdieu, 1990, p.61), there is a prevailing assumption within the occupational group that one must begin as a SO^{NL} to gain proficiency in the procedural aspects of the work. This perspective was frequently used to highlight the fundamental distinctions between the roles of SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL}, often characterized as a contrast between black-and-white versus nuanced, grey approaches to decision-making and behaviour. The procedural focus of the SO^{NL} role is intended to help novice prison officers become acquainted with the institution's rules and security protocols.

> "I also view the SO^{NL}-group as a talent pool. You need to engage these individuals, entice them, and provide opportunities such as allowing them to follow an experienced PO^{NL} for a day, you know, to pique their interest. So that way we (PO^{NL}) can assess their potential: if someone proves to be a good fit, we can express our desire to have them on our team."
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{NL}, July 13, 2023)

While some prison officers describe the SO^{NL} role as if it were a deliberate strategic approach to talent development and recruitment, functioning as a preparatory stage in the professional growth of prison officers, this perception does not reflect an intentional policy embedded within the Dutch prison system. From their perspective, starting in the SO^{NL} role can seem to offer opportunities to observe and eventually transition into more complex positions such as PO^{NL}, potentially strengthening competencies and creating a pipeline of skilled personnel. However, this narrative overlooks a more complex reality. The SO^{NL} position also immerses officers in a distinctly black-and-white, control-oriented aspect of prison work, where procedural enforcement is prioritised over relational engagement. Such early exposure may create barriers to developing the nuanced interpersonal skills needed to work effectively on the landings. This dynamic aligns with broader insights on occupational socialisation and security culture, where early role experiences can entrench particular working styles that are difficult to adjust later in a career (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Morrison & Maycock, 2021). In the Dutch case, the SO^{NL} role's structural separation from the more relational PO^{NL} role intensifies this effect, hampering later adaptation to landing work. Mentoring SO^{NL} as potential PO^{NL} therefore requires not only available capacity within PO^{NL} teams but also deliberate efforts to broaden their approach beyond a purely custodial mindset. At the time of the research, both Dutch institutions faced significant shortages in PO^{NL} schedules. To address these gaps, (inexperienced) SO^{NL} were assigned to the units to support the execution of the daily program. Their presence often led to tensions: relying more heavily on formal rules and unaware of informal agreements between PO^{NL} and incarcerated persons, SO^{NL} could unintentionally disrupt the delicate relational balance maintained on the landings.

> While an incarcerated individual is in the phone booth making a call, a SO^{NL}, who is stationed on the unit today, approaches him and signals that he needs to hang up. "I don't understand, I'm allowed to make calls now," the incarcerated individual responds. The SO^{NL} then opens the door to the phone booth: "You're only allowed to use the phone during your designated block, and since you're on the basic program, that's not until this afternoon." The incarcerated person becomes irritated and explains that a PO^{NL} had given him permission to make the call. The SO^{NL} replies, "And I'm telling you it's not your time to make calls, so hang up and go back to your cell." The incarcerated individual glances toward the team office, hoping to catch The PO^{NL} eye, but she is busy in conversation. Frustrated, he hangs up and heads back to his cell, which the SO^{NL} then locks behind him. The SO^{NL} proceeds to ask PO^{NL} why incarcerated individual had been allowed to make a call outside his designated block. The PO^{NL} sighs, "I let him make the call because he has an appointment with the case manager soon, and he wouldn't be able to call during his block. Now he's going to have a complete meltdown. Just come to me first next time, we make exceptions from time to time."
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Observation, January 18, 2023)

These types of exceptions are almost continuously made by PO^{NL} and are perceived by SO^{NL}s as a breach of the more rigid application of rules they are accustomed to following. Due to the nature of their job description, SO^{NL}s rarely implement exceptions to the rules. As a result, it is not self-evident that SO^{NL}s can adopt the concept of *bejegening* (humane treatment).

> "*Bejegenen* also involves saying no at times. But I'm also allowed to say yes. That's essentially what *bejegenen* is. *Bejegenen* is a very broad concept, but essentially it's about 'interacting with' others and the way you do it. SO^{NL}s don't have that kind of interaction. For them, a light only goes on when a door needs to be opened, and then they press the button to unlock it. If no light goes on, there's no need for them to press anything, right?"
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{NL}, June 22, 2023)

This distinction underscores a critical divide in how the two roles are perceived by Dutch prison officers. For PO^{NL}, it represents an active and ongoing negotiation of relationships within the prison environment. For SO^{NL}s, the lack of relational engagement is framed as a barrier to adopting this broader concept of *bejegenen*. The speaker's tone suggests that this divide is both a structural and cultural issue, shaped by the differing expectations and responsibilities associated with each role. Which raises questions about the challenges of integrating relational practices like *bejegenen* into roles traditionally focused on procedural enforcement. This divide becomes tangible in day-to-day interactions, where procedural enforcement by SO^{NL}s can clash with the relational strategies of PO^{NL}s, sometimes escalating rather than diffusing tensions. The following fieldnote captures one such moment, illustrating how differing role expectations play out in practice and the relational repair work this can create for PO^{NL}s.

> A small group of incarcerated persons heads toward the yard for the afternoon walk. One of them dribbles a ball as they pass through the corridor. From behind the glass of the control room, a SO^{NL} voice cuts through sharply over the intercom: "Hey! Knock it off with that ball. And quit loitering between the units, get moving!" The incarcerated person pauses and looks toward the control room: "We're on our way, what's your problem?" The BEWA's voice comes back louder, dripping with irritation: "My problem is that you are already late to the courtyard and your mouth when I tell you to get a move on. Keep it up and you'll get written up for disrespect. Last warning." The incarcerated person mutters something under his breath, loud enough to be heard, about "looking for trouble." At that moment, a PO^{NL} walks over from the landing and guides the man toward the yard, telling him quietly to "just drop it."
>
> An hour later, word gets back to the PO^{NL} that the SO^{NL} has filed an official report for "arrogant and disrespectful behaviour." The PO^{NL} is in disbelieve: "Unbelievable. For bouncing a ball? He started this discussion, that's picking a fight and then hiding behind paperwork." He announces he'll be writing his own report to set the record straight so the man doesn't get sanctioned. "Some people have no clue how to keep the peace, they stir the pot and walk away, and I'm the one left to clean up the mess."
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Observation, February 15, 2023)

For the SO^{NL}, whose daily reality is defined by surveillance, time discipline, and enforcing order at a distance, bouncing a ball and lingering in the corridor reads as defiance, a challenge to be met with a formal, documentable response. In this cultural logic, authority is maintained by showing that even small acts of noncompliance will be noted and sanctioned. For the PO^{NL}, whose legitimacy depends on sustaining everyday working relationships on the landings, the SO^{NL} choice to escalate a trivial incident into a formal report is viewed not as diligence but as a needless provocation. From this perspective, the report actively undermines order by creating resentment, damaging rapport, and leaving the PO^{NL} to "clean up" the conflict on the unit, and is framed by the PO^{NL} as poor judgement that destabilises the social fabric of the wing.

4.2.2 Regime Logics and the security mindset

While the specific form of role differentiation seen in the Dutch model is absent in the observed Belgian prisons, a related tension can be observed between prison officers working in different regimes. In the Dutch case, this emerges from the structural and cultural distinctions between SO^{NL} and PO^{NL} positions; in the Belgian context, it stems from the contrasting operational demands of closed versus more open units. While PO^{BE}s in Prison A predominantly work in a closed setting, there are also units where an open regime is implemented. This regime is somewhat comparable to the *plusprogramma* (i.e. Plus Program in Promotion and Demotion) applied in Dutch prisons. In these units, incarcerated individuals enjoy greater freedoms throughout the day, providing more opportunities for interaction with the on-duty staff. In such contexts, PO^{BE}s adopt a more negotiation approach compared to other units in Prison A, where the austerity of regimes fosters a more detached attitude among staff. In these stricter units, the dependence of incarcerated individuals on staff is also significantly higher. As a PO^{BE} explained:

> "The drug-free unit isn't for everyone. You need to have a different mindset here. The detainees are almost free to move around all day, which actually means less work for us. You're not constantly running from one door to the next. People who don't work on these units don't understand it. On their units, nothing is allowed, and they see this approach as less professional. Over there, everything is a "no," whereas here, the detainees don't really need to ask for permission for everything. They can visit each other in their cells. Yeah… those are things you can't explain to the staff on the closed units, it's heresy to them."
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE}, May 24, 2022)

This PO^{BE} contrasts the operational logic of drug-free units, which emphasize incarcerated persons autonomy and a relaxed environment, with the stricter, control-focused logic of closed units. According to institutional theory, these distinct regimes reflect divergent institutional logics: one prioritizes rehabilitation and incarcerated person responsibility, while the other emphasizes security and control. In the drug-free unit, the approach relies on more normalization, where incarcerated individuals are granted freedoms closer to those in the outside world. This aligns with rehabilitative models that aim to prepare incarcerated persons for reintegration by fostering trust and responsibility. In contrast, the closed units operate under a punitive logic, where rigid control and limited autonomy are seen as necessary for maintaining security. Staff in closed units associate professionalism with strict rule enforcement and minimal flexibility. The reference to scepticism or dismissal from closed-unit staff to staff working in open units ("they see this as less professional") illustrates how occupational subcultures can develop distinct norms and values based on the regime they work within. Staff in drug-free units perceive their work as less labour-intensive and based on mutual trust rather than constant supervision. However, this is viewed by closed-unit staff as less legitimate or professional. This tension can be analysed through notions of authority and legitimacy: in closed units, staff derive their sense of legitimacy from strict adherence to rules and hierarchical authority, whereas drug-free unit staff see legitimacy as stemming from relational interactions and rehabilitative goals. The speaker's description of this difference as "heresy" in the eyes of closed-unit staff underscores the ideological divide. It reflects a struggle over what constitutes "good" prison work, with one group valuing flexibility and trust, and the other valuing discipline and control.

> The conversation drifts toward the drug-free unit, a project on four units of Block One, subsidised by the Flemish Community. "It's not a prison anymore over there, it's more like Plopsaland" he says. He launches into a rant about how little control officers supposedly have on that unit. "They just do whatever they want. They don't check anything. It's all based on trust. Trust! In here!" He throws his hands up, as if the absurdity speaks for itself.
>
> The freedoms on the drug-free unit, more movement, fewer searches, a friendlier tone from staff, are framed as naïve. "We call it *drugs for everyone*,". "Because that's what it's like. If you really wanted to hide something, that's where you'd go." "Meanwhile, we're over here actually doing prison work, keeping order, keeping control. Over there, they're running around handing out smiles and pretending problems don't exist."
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE}, April 7, 2022)

This is a deeply sceptical view of the drug-free unit, framing its operational philosophy as incompatible with the speaker's understanding of "real" prison work. Here, the core of the prison officer's occupational identity rests on maintaining control through surveillance, searches, and rule enforcement. The drug-free unit's emphasis on trust, increased movement, and reduced security checks is perceived not as a progressive intervention but as a loss of professional authority and a dilution of the prison's custodial function. The sarcastic nickname serves to undermine the programme's legitimacy, while the analogy casts it as a superficial, feel-good space detached from the realities of incarceration. This divergent regime differentiation in a single prison also reflects deeper historical currents in Belgian penal culture. In closed regimes, especially those operating under high-security or provisional detention conditions, such as most units in prison A, show that elements of an authoritarian tradition remain prominent: strict compliance with rules, clear hierarchies, limited discretion, and a custodial mindset that prioritises order and discipline over relational engagement. These settings preserve many of the structural and cultural hallmarks of an earlier, more custodially oriented prison systems. By contrast, open and special-purpose regimes (such as the drug-free unit) represent a post-authoritarian shift within this institution. Here, trust, dialogue, and negotiated compliance are emphasised, reflecting broader shifts toward dynamic security.

These two orientations coexist within the same institution, creating a layered occupational environment. For officers in closed regimes, post-authoritarian practices can appear to erode the clarity of authority and compromise safety; for officers in open regimes, authoritarian practices may be seen as outdated and counterproductive to rehabilitation. The resulting tensions are not merely operational but speak to competing visions of what prison work should be.

> "My adjustment period? It's still ongoing. I've been working here for five years, and you're not going to get that out of me. We've all been shaped by that mindset; it's been drilled into us. I've worked on the strictest units, terrorism, you name it. When I first came here and saw what was allowed… I lost it. I was on the verge of leaving. I thought I'd be able to find some calm here (Prison B), but it's always chaos. The headcount is never accurate, and you just have to trust that everyone is there. Over there (Prison A), everything was locked down if the headcount didn't add up."
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE} August 25, 2022)

This PO^{BE} highlights how their professional identity has been shaped by years of working in security-focused environments. This reflects the process of occupational socialization, where individuals internalize the norms, values, and practices of their work environment (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The phrase "shaped by that mindset" and "drilled into us" suggests that the previous experience on "the strictest units" fostered a deep-seated orientation toward rigid security protocols and control-focused work. This entrenched mindset makes adapting to a different institutional environment challenging, particularly when the operational logic in the new institution appears more chaotic. This mismatch reflects a culture clash between institutions operating under different institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012). Prison A prioritizes static security, emphasizing strict adherence to procedural rules to maintain order. Prison B, on the other hand, prioritizes dynamic security and rehabilitation-focused practices. For individuals deeply ingrained in the former culture, the transition to practical mastery of the new environment can feel become threatening to their professional identity. The speaker's ongoing struggle to adapt after five years illustrates the durability of occupational cultures, especially those developed in high-stress, high-security contexts. The speaker's emotional response ("I lost it," "I was on the verge of leaving") indicates the psychological strain that accompanies adapting to a new work environment with contrasting norms.

> Incoming incarcerated persons are a rare occurrence in prison B. When word comes in that a new incarcerated person has arrived, I ask if I can join the intake. The admission room is small. A desk sits in the middle, scattered with all kinds of equipment (e.g. tape, forms, boxes). The incoming man is holding a cardboard box with his belongings that were transferred from another prison. The PO^{BE} asks the man to open the box so she can make an inventory of the items. Layer upon layer of clear tape has sealed it tight. The man picks at the edge of the tape with his nails, but it barely gives way.
>
> I glance at the scissors lying on the desk and, without thinking much, mention them to the officer. Without hesitation, she picks it up before the incarcerated person can use them. "I'll do it.", she says while slicing through the tape quickly.

> When the man is escorted out for the next step in the intake, she leans toward me: *"I would never hand a sharp object to a prisoner. You don't know yet who you've got in front of you. I don't trust him for a second."* "Safety first," she adds, "even here."
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Observation, August 30, 2022)

Occupational performance is actively constructed through small, routine decisions. The PO$^{\mathrm{BE}}$'s swift removal of the scissors from the incarcerated person's reach was not merely a practical measure but a deliberate enactment of the "safety first" principle that underpins the security-oriented dimension of prison officer identity. In this moment, the officer reinforced a default posture of mistrust toward those she does not yet know. Her remark frames trust as something to be earned over time, not granted at the outset. This position reflects a wider security culture in which vigilance and control take precedence, even in a facility where incarcerated persons regularly handle sharp objects in other contexts such as kitchens or workshops. Here, the generative mechanisms at play are both structural, rooted in formal responsibilities to maintain security, and cultural, sustained through shared occupational norms that valorise caution over accommodation. In this sense, the officer's behaviour reflects how prison staff construct and affirm their professional identity not only through high-stakes incidents but also through the mundane, everyday enactment of security logics.

> In the PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$ team room, a small pegboard hangs on the wall, holding a few kitchen knives, scissors, and other utensils used by incarcerated persons during cooking. Each tool has its own outline drawn in marker to indicate where it belongs. I notice several of the outlines are empty. "Where are these?" I ask. She shrugs. "No idea. Someone's got them." I ask if that's not a concern. She smiles. "We could turn the whole unit upside down, but in the end we'd only make life harder for ourselves. Besides, it's a bigger issue for them. Without kitchen tools, they can't cook. So they'll turn up eventually."
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, June 8, 2023)

In contrast to the previous note, the observation in Dutch prison D presents a more relaxed relationship to the same category of "security objects." The PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$ acknowledges that several knives and scissors are unaccounted for but treats their eventual return as inevitable, reasoning that incarcerated persons depend on these tools for cooking. In doing so, responsibility is implicitly placed on the prison population to safeguard and return shared kitchen equipment, as losing it would directly impact their own daily routines. This approach reflects a form of pragmatic risk management in which order is sustained not by restricting access, but by relying on the self-correcting nature of communal life. Contexts seem to shape prison officers' interpretations of risk and control, revealing distinct generative mechanisms in the construction of occupational identity: one rooted in anticipatory restriction, the other in selective enforcement and operational pragmatism.

> A package has been thrown over the wall into the yard. A SO^{NL} announces his decision to stop all movements within the prison. PO's are instructed to bring every incarcerated person on the yard inside for a full body search, no exceptions. One by one, each person is escorted to the search room. The process is methodical, slow, and all-consuming. The entire institution bends around the search protocol. This is what "security first" looks like when risk is suspected. The decision to halt all activity has effectively frozen the prison's normal operations, channelling every resource toward locating and containing the possible contraband. For the moment, control takes absolute priority over everything else.
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, July 16 2023)

Both situations take place in the same Dutch prison, yet the responses are rather contrasting to managing security risks. The discovery of a possible security breach triggers a highly centralised and disruptive response: all movement is stopped, the entire yard population is subjected to body searches, and the prison's daily operations are effectively frozen. The breach subjugates the normal working of the prison landings to the decision-making of a SO^{NL}, whose authority redirects all available resources toward containment and control. These divergent reactions highlight how prison officer decision-making can swing between pragmatic tolerance and absolute control, depending on the nature of the perceived threat. Both responses are embedded in the same structural and cultural context, yet they reflect different facets of the occupational identity, either as managers of shared order or as enforcers of total security. Incidents like these became a daily occurrence in the final months of fieldwork in Prison D, paralysing operations across the entire institution. Keeping the daily programme running was made subordinate to the SO^{NL}'s efforts to limit the amount of contraband entering the prison. This came at the cost of subjecting everyone, without exception, to strip searches. This, to some extent, stands in contrast to Prison C.

4.3 Chapter Conclusion

The construction of occupational identity in prison work is not a singular process but the outcome of intersecting legislative, structural, and cultural mechanisms. These forces do not simply define job descriptions; they shape how prison officers understand their role, their authority, and their relationship to those in custody. Legislation provides the formal parameters and codifying duties. Structure translates these frameworks into operational realities through staffing models, regime types, and role allocations. Culture filters both through lived experience, creating shared understandings, informal norms, and hierarchies of value between different types of prison work.

The comparative analysis of Belgium and the Netherlands reveals that these dimensions are neither static nor uniform. Legislative frameworks such as the earlier General Instruction to the Belgian Penitentiary Act (2019) and the Dutch policy documents 'Task and Future' to the Modernising the

Prison Service and the Punishment and Protection Act (2021) articulate distinct visions of prison work, from the absence or presence of formal role differentiation to the degree of procedural codification. These legislative choices ripple through structural arrangements: in the Netherlands, SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL}s operate within sharply delineated roles that influence their capacity for relational engagement, whereas in Belgium, the absence of such formal separation keeps relational and custodial duties intertwined, though unevenly expressed. Cultural dynamics then either reinforce or contest these structures. In the Dutch case, tensions between security-focused and relationally-focused officers are formalised into separate posts; in the Belgian context, similar divides are mapped onto differences between open and closed regimes, with contrasting expectations for how authority is exercised and relationships are managed.

Across both systems, the ways officers interpret their roles are deeply conditioned by their position within these legislative-structural-cultural intersections. SO^{NL}s, working at a distance and prioritising procedural enforcement, tend to frame their authority through visible control and sanction, while PO^{NL}s and PO^{BE}s in more relationally oriented settings invest in negotiation, rapport, and situational discretion. Where relational engagement is institutionally recognised, for example, in some Belgian open regimes, it is more easily sustained as part of everyday practice. Where it is structurally constrained or legislatively sidelined, officers retreat into rule enforcement.

The contrast between the Dutch model's explicit role differentiation and Belgium's regime-based role divergence illustrates a deeper point: occupational identity in prison work is not simply "given" by law or policy but emerges in the negotiation between formal frameworks and everyday practice. The same tasks carry different meanings depending on whether they are performed in a context that prizes interpersonal knowledge or procedural uniformity. This negotiation is also a site of tension, between officers whose operational priorities diverge, and between institutional demands.

Ultimately, the chapter underscores that occupational identity is both a product and a driver of prison practice. Legislative designs can shape it, structural arrangements can channel it, and culture can either harden or soften its boundaries. But identity also pushes back, influencing how laws are interpreted, how structures are inhabited, and how cultures evolve. If prison administrations wish to sustain a workforce that is not only operationally effective but also professionally grounded, they must recognise that identity is forged in the interplay of these mechanisms – and that undermining one dimension risks destabilising the others. In both Belgium and the Netherlands, the long-term challenge lies in balancing the procedural and the relational, the legislative and the lived, in ways that preserve the legitimacy and coherence of prison officer professionalism.

5

Thinking, Feeling, Doing: Beyond the Analysis of Prison Officer Roles

The previous chapter explored prison work of PO$^{\mathrm{BE}}$, PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$, and SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$ through their distinct roles and regulatory frameworks. The comparison between prison officers working in Belgium or the Netherlands demonstrated how prison officers perceive both their own roles and those of others beyond formal job descriptions, viewing them through the lens of their positionality within the prison they work in and the responsibilities they bear (Humblet, 2020; Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011; Nylander & Bruhn, 2011; Tournel, 2015). The chapter also highlighted that professional identities among prison officers are malleable, contingent on their daily environments, and formed through the gradual accumulation of experience and practical mastery, closely tied to the cultural transmission of skills described as "jail craft" (Garrihy, 2021; Liebling, 2008; Peacock et al., 2017). The roles officers perceive themselves to hold deeply influence how they navigate and perform their daily tasks, whether this involves ensuring security, enforcing discipline, providing care or managing structured interactions with incarcerated individuals (Crewe, 2009; Garrihy, 2018).

This chapter shifts the focus from how prison officers perceive their roles, that is, how they understand, define, and describe their professional position, to how they enact these roles in practice. It examines what it means to think, feel, and act as a prison officer in Belgium or the Netherlands, attending to how officers give practical expression to their role on the prison floor. Drawing on Nylander's (2011) concept of occupational identities, the chapter treats professional identity not as fixed or self-evident, but as something that is continually shaped, negotiated, and performed through the day-to-day realities of prison work. Occupational identity emerges through a combination of how prison officers understand their role, how they manage the emotional pressures of the job, and how they interact with others, both colleagues and incarcerated persons, in structured and repeated ways. Officers develop mental frameworks, social representations, that help them define who they are in relation to their role, their peers, and those in custody. These representations guide whether they view themselves, for example, as enforcers, protectors, or facilitators of change. Their emotional labour, the ongoing management of feelings such as frustration, empathy, or detachment, is shaped by institutional expectations and peer norms (Crawley, 2004b; Hochschild, 1983). And through their daily routines and recurring interpersonal rituals, what Goffman (1959) defined as front-stage and back-stage performances, officers reinforce both their own and others' understanding of how prison work should be carried out.

This framework sheds light on the emotional burdens, coping strategies, and moral discomforts that define prison work as a form of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Garrihy, 2021), not only because of the association of those in custody or with tasks of control and coercion, but because of the psychological toll it takes on those who perform it. These aspects make the prison officer's occupational position not just a matter of role but of deeply felt and negotiated experience. While much of the existing literature has acknowledged the emotional strain and long-term psychological consequences of prison work, this study also confirms that prison officers across all four prisons, Belgian and Dutch, expressed such effects in strikingly similar terms. Regardless of their institutional context, officers described feelings of bitterness, detachment, emotional exhaustion, and changes in how they felt. The following quotes from each prison illustrate how deeply prison work can affect those who perform it in general terms:

> *Bitterness, that's the impact. After four years, you're not the same. You become more aggressive, less tolerant, more rigid and even racist. You take that attitude outside with you. You become more alert and suspicious. And the outside world doesn't understand you, they don't get what this job entails. Nobody speaks this language, except for the staff.*
>
> (Prison A ,Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE}, March 10, 2022)

> *Working in a prison inevitably changes you, even here. It's not natural. If you spend too long working on the prison wing, it eventually wears you down, you end up feeling completely drained.*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 1)

> *If you work here long enough, then you literally, excuse my language, stop giving a shit about anything. As old-fashioned as it may sound, that's who I've become over the years. It's not that you don't have feelings, but you push them away. Sometimes you don't even know if you're truly feeling anything anymore.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 1)

> *You develop a certain hardness in your life. You really adopt a kind of humour to survive. If you take everything home with you and you don't try to talk it off here with colleagues, or lighten it with a joke, then you won't make it.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO^{NL} 12)

The bitterness and psychological toll they describe are hallmarks of how workers in dirty jobs internalize the stigma and adapt to its demands (Garrihy, 2020). Psychological dirty work deals with the internalization of stigma and the mental strategies used to manage the emotional and moral challenges of a stigmatized role. The officers descriptions reflect the psychological cost of performing such work. They note how prolonged exposure to the prison environment alters one's worldview, leading to increased aggressiveness and suspicion, even outside of work. This suggests that psychological dirty work is not just about managing the stigma associated with the job but also about coping with the erosion of personal identity and values over time, as the cumulative impact of the environment becomes more deeply embedded in one's sense of self (Garrihy, 2021). For prison officers, this includes projecting authority, controlling frustration or fear, and often suppressing empathy or compassion in interactions with incarcerated persons. This labour is amplified when the officer has to manage their emotions not only with prisoners but also with colleagues and in their personal lives. Korczynski (2003) introduced the concept of "communities of coping" in the workplace. Prison officers represent a strong yet nuanced community of coping. Their unique position within society fosters a sense that non-prison officers "just don't get it" and that "only officers understand".

However, rather than centring solely on these commonalities, which are well-documented, the chapter shifts focus to the differences. We explore how these burdens are shaped and refracted through distinct roles (PO^{BE}, PO^{NL}, SO^{NL}), working environments, and local institutional cultures. The emphasis therefore lies not merely on what prison work does to officers in general, but on how and why it impacts them differently depending on where and how they work.

5.1 The Collapse of Collective Identity Among Belgian Prison Officers

In the Belgian Prison A, the all-pervasive insularity, as described in Chapter three, has profound consequences for the occupational identity of PO^{BE}s (Pardon et al., 2025). Prison A is composed of fragmented, closed units where PO^{BE}s are assigned to work alone. Officers often go entire shifts without seeing any colleagues, and this spatial isolation and operational fragmentation disrupts the development of a shared occupational identity. Informal exchanges, such as coffee breaks or quick check-ins, are not commonplace. One officer noted:

> *The biggest difference is that the collegiality, the group, the cohesion between colleagues in other prisons is much closer than here. Here you have all these subdivisions and small units, and you don't know each other, sometimes you hardly see each other.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 19).

In other settings, such informal moments serve as key rituals that reinforce professional belonging and emotional support. Their absence in Prison A fosters what officers referred to as an "island mentality", where individuals show up for their shift, complete their hours in isolation, and leave without significant social contact (Pardon et al., 2025). As one respondent described:

> *We see each other less here, they're all on their own little island. [...] So that's the biggest difference. And that determines the functioning, but also the atmosphere among colleagues.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 2)

This isolation undermines the solidarity that traditionally defines prison officer culture (Crawley & Crawley, 2008). Instead, officers adopt a more defensive, individualized stance: a "me versus them" mentality, in which colleagues do not perceive their colleagues as antagonistic nor benign, but unfamiliar. The loss of a collective identity does not merely affect morale, it reshapes how officers think about themselves and their role. Rather than identifying as part of a team, officers come to see their function as a lone burden to carry. The absence of relational reinforcement alters their occupational self-concept, pushing them toward proceduralism and emotional retreat. Emotional labour in this context is marked not by the nuanced adjustment of emotional expression (modulation), but by a more rigid and suppressive form of emotional labour in which feelings are effectively "shut down" or pushed aside in order to cope with the demands of the environment. Officers are left to deal with intense experiences, aggression, self-harm of incarcerated individuals, institutional failures, without avenues for emotional processing or peer validation. As an instance during fieldwork highlights:

> It was just after the midday count when PO^{BE} Jonas noticed a light flick above one of the cells. A request. He sighed. He walked over, knocked once, and slid open the door slightly. Inside, the detained person was already waiting. *"Hey, boss, you got some tobacco for me?"* Jonas shook his head. *"You know the rules. You need to order you tobacco, no handouts or passing on from others."* The detainee sighed, rubbing his face. *"Come on, just a little. I'm out." "Not happening,"* Jonas said, already shifting to close the hatch. But before he could, the detainee put his foot in between. Jonas was startled. *"That's not how it works pal. Back inside, right now."* The detainee didn't budge. *"I'm serious, man, I need to smoke."* Jonas didn't wait as he instantly pushed the alarm. Fifteen seconds passed before the announcement came through the intercom: *"Alarm, section 54."* The seconds dragged on as he tried to push him back in his cell and close the door, but the detained person wouldn't budge. Another fifteen seconds before footsteps echoed down the corridor. With backup present, the detainee backed up but was pulled out by two PO^{BE}s and cuffed. Afterwards he was put in a safety cell until further notice. There was practically no debriefing. As soon as the situation was 'neutralized', everyone was gone. Jonas stood there for a moment, still out of breath. I asked him if everything was okay, but he just shrugged it off, walking back in silence to his desk, opening a tab on his computer to write a report.
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observation, June 8, 2022)

Without backstage spaces to release tension or recalibrate, the emotional burden becomes internalised. Working alone hinders the development of close relationships and a sense of belonging, weakening the occupational culture of solidarity among prison officers which is essential for developing in-group camaraderie (Maculan & Rodelli, 2022; Poole & Regoli, 1981). This is noteworthy because the mutual solidarity amongst prison officers serves as a "source of protection, camaraderie and status" (Garrihy, 2020, p. 146) that has widely been described as a key characteristic of prison officer culture (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2018; Kauffman, 1988; Tournel, 2015).

Officers expressed feelings of extreme social deprivation in regards to their colleagues:

> *As a prison officer, you are also a bit incarcerated. I certainly have that feeling as soon as I arrive. You take your keys, you are thrown into a unit, you have to stay there during the shift, and you hardly see anyone. It's a strange feeling indeed. You work with up to a hundred colleagues in the entire prison, and you don't see anyone throughout the day. At best, I'll see a colleague across the corridor. But besides that? There are days when you have almost no contact.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 16).

Beyond the moral or physical taint commonly associated with prison work, the PO^{BE}s of Prison A experience a deeper form of psychological taint. Their job does not just associate them with stigma, it isolates them emotionally and socially. Officers describe feeling trapped, with spontaneous conversations being a rare occurrence. It is, in many ways, an identity forged in absence of connection or teamwork. Some PO^{BE}s described themselves as "hollowed out" or "emotionally numb," reflecting a defensive stance shaped by years of reactive and monotonous work without regular interaction or resolution, as one prison officer explained:

> *Many colleagues are bored-out. You get to a point where you think: 'What am I even doing here?' I don't see anyone, you have to do it all on your own.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 9)

5.2 Environmental Relief and Occupational Reframing

In contrast to the individualized culture observed in Belgian Prison A, the occupational environment of PO^{BE}s in the much smaller Prison B is shaped by an open regime and a rural, green setting. The spatial layout of the prison, coupled with daily routines that require constant presence among both colleagues and incarcerated individuals, fosters a work environment where officers develop a more relational and flexible sense of self. This stands in stark contrast to experiences in closed institutions, as one officer recalled:

> *"In other prisons, everything felt artificial, from the lighting to the air. Stepping outside after a shift even hurt a little, like, 'ugh, migraine', just from seeing natural light again."*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 5)

This reflection captures how sensorial deprivations and physical taint (Herrity et al., 2021; Tracy & Scott, 2007) may subject officers in closed prison environments to "atmospheres" that are suffocating and unnatural (Turner & Peters, 2015). The sensory discomfort upon re-entering the natural world suggests that prison officers are not merely located within carceral conditions, but are, in a sense, shaped by them. This echoes Wacquant's (2002) argument that the carceral institution extends beyond its walls, not only disciplining incarcerated persons but also impressing itself upon those who enforce its regimes. Similarly, Goffman's (1961) notion of the "total institution" highlights how spatial and institutional arrangements structure perception, embodiment, and interaction. From the perspective of carceral geography (Moran et al., 2018), this discomfort can be read as a bodily trace of institutional immersion, where the prison's sensory and emotional atmosphere becomes internalized, reorganizing officers' rhythms, thresholds, and affective orientations even outside its confines. In contrast to the confinement and sensory restriction of closed prisons, Prison B's open design, combined with its status as a lower-security facility, allows for greater freedom of movement and exposure to natural elements. As Jewkes and Moran (2015) and Beijersbergen et al. (2016) argue, such environmental features can reduce stress, foster a sense of normalcy, and enhance wellbeing.

> *"When you work in a place where you have natural light, where I can even walk outside and enjoy nature, you don't feel like just a prison officer, you feel like a person. It makes coming to work less stressful."*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 4)

Echoing Turner et al.'s (2022) argument that prison environments, shaped by their material and sensory features, leave lasting impressions on both incarcerated individuals and staff, the spatial layout of Prison B appears to have a distinctly humanizing effect on prison officers. The reference to "feeling like a person" highlights how institutional settings, particularly those marked by rigidity, surveillance, and depersonalization, can erode one's sense of self and personhood (Hochschild, 1983; Tracy & Scott, 2007). In such environments, emotional expression is tightly controlled, and staff may come to feel like functional extensions of the institution rather than autonomous individuals. Therefore, moments or spaces that restore this sense of personhood represent a meaningful counterbalance to the emotionally straining aspects of prison work.

> *For me, it's a lot more freedom, really. Even if I might spend most of my time sitting in this chair, I still feel like I'm much more outside. I can also go outside whenever I want, really. I just need to ask my colleagues if it's appropriate. But actually, I can step outside whenever. I'm free to decide when I go out for some fresh air and when I don't. That's the big advantage. That you can say, 'I'm going to get some fresh air now.'*
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, quote PO^{BE}, October 11, 2022)

This experience stands in sharp contrast to that of PO^{BE}s in Prison A and the conditions described by Mears et al. (2023), where staff themselves endure forms of 'captivity' marked by restricted movement and limited autonomy. Here, the PO^{BE} emphasizes a sense of spatial freedom and control, highlighting the ability to step outside for fresh air as a meaningful act of self-determination. While seemingly minor, this autonomy signals a more humanizing work environment, where the material design of the prison helps to reduce insularity.

> *Main reason: to get away from the negativity, away from the concrete block. I needed a fresh start basically. I felt stuck doing the same things every day. I felt drained… I needed something new. So, that's why I came here, because it's so different from what I was used to.*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 1)

This evocative statement captures more than personal dissatisfaction; it articulates a deeply embodied experience of the oppressive atmospheres found in high-security, closed institutions. The "concrete block" becomes a metaphor not only for the built environment but also for the psychological weight and sensory deprivation associated with such spaces. As Turner et al. (2022) argue, prison atmospheres are not merely material but seep into the emotional and bodily experiences of those who inhabit them. These effects are particularly pronounced in maximum-security settings, where heightened control, surveillance, and restricted movement amplify the sense of containment and disconnection (Mears et al., 2023). The rigidity, dim lighting, stale air, and spatial confinement of closed prisons contribute to an environment that "wraps up, smothers, and incites" (Crewe, 2011, p. 522), leaving staff vulnerable to fatigue and disengagement and feeling sealed in. The officer's turn toward "something new" reflects a drive for affective relief and a reconstitution of self. The move to a more open, natural setting, like that of Prison B, thus becomes a form of refocusing and reframing (Ashforth et al., 2007; Eriksson, 2021), strategies used by individuals to redirect attention away from the tainted aspects of their role and toward more affirming, human-centred elements.

Finally, officers in Prison B describe their workplace as notably cohesive and supportive, in contrast to the more fragmented environments often associated with larger or more restrictive institutions. One officer remarked:

> *"Familial, because in this prison, you really know everyone, without exception."*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 2)

This observation reflects how institutional scale and spatial design influence the frequency and quality of staff interactions. In smaller, more accessible settings, officers tend to develop stronger interpersonal familiarity, which facilitates informal support, mutual trust, and efficient communication (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Johnsen, Granheim & Helgesen, 2011). These conditions align with research indicating that occupational cultures are not monolithic but shaped by local dynamics (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011). When officers work in settings that promote regular interaction and shared experience, a sense of belonging and solidarity is more likely to emerge to buffer the demands of the job (Garrihy, 2023).

5.3 NAVIGATING THE ARCHITECTURE OF ORDER

Chapter 4 examined how SO^{NL}s perceive their occupational role within the Dutch penitentiary system. However, notable institutional differences between the two studied Dutch prisons shape how SO^{NL}s carry out their duties, understand their responsibilities, and experience their professional identity. In Prison C, SO^{NL}s operate under the policy of independently moving incarcerated persons (IMD), known in Dutch as *Zelfstandig Verplaatsen Gedetineerden* (ZVG), which fundamentally alters both the security function and the symbolic dimensions of their work. While IMD is institutionally framed as a step toward normalization and autonomy for incarcerated persons, many SO^{NL}s interpret the policy as contributing to diminished control, oversight, and personal authority. In contrast, Prison D houses incarcerated persons flagged as high-risk individuals – classified as *Escape and/or Societal Risk Incarcerated persons* (ESRD, known in Dutch as *Gedetineerden met een Vlucht- en/of Maatschappelijk risico*, or GVM) – necessitating highly regulated movements and reinforcing a custodial regime rooted in procedural clarity and authority (Roks et al, 2024).

Although SO^{NL}s in both settings formally perform the same role, the institutional logic within which they are 'embedded' (Lerman & Page, 2012) significantly shapes their professional orientation. In Prison C, officers experience a dislocation from their custodial identity, marked by a perceived erosion of control and the breakdown of operational routines. These disruptions alter not only how SO^{NL}s act, but how they feel and think about their work. A central concern among SO^{NL}s in Prison C relates to the loss of central oversight and the uncertainty this creates. Officers describe no longer having reliable information on incarcerated person whereabouts, leading to impaired situational awareness. As one SO^{NL} explained:

> *Back then, the prisoners were checked by us at every step. If they had to leave their unit, the PO^{NL} would give us a heads-up. The detainee would report to the CP (Central Post), give their name, cell number, and say where they were going. Then we'd call the corridor, and they'd be checked again there. Now, you just don't know where people are going. They can just move around freely. You're left wondering, 'Where is he?'.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 4)

Rather than exercising direct control, SO^{NL}s are relegated to a more passive role under the ESRD-system. This shift marks a departure from the traditional custodial model in which officers held visible and direct authority over detained persons (Crawley, 2004a; Liebling, 2000). As that authority becomes more symbolic than enacted, SO^{NL} report feeling increasingly sidelined and redundant in their role. What was previously a position of strategic oversight has become a marginal presence in the prison's operational flow. Importantly, this experience of redundancy must be understood in light of a broader institutional shift: one that reorients the prison's focus from control to agency for incarcerated persons. While this shift is rooted in contemporary correctional policy, SO^{NL} find themselves unprepared or insufficiently positioned to embody this new orientation. Their professional identity, shaped by practices of spatial control and procedural oversight, stands at odds with the institution's current emphasis on incarcerated persons self-reliance – a shift that has reconfigured prison operations without redefining the SO^{NL}'s role within them. As a result, the erosion of traditional custodial routines destabilizes not only their functional responsibilities but also their affective commitment to the job. This emotional bond – built through consistency, authority, and a sense of competence – is a key aspect of "jail craft". Without stable structures through which to enact their role meaningfully, SO^{NL}s struggle to situate themselves within the evolving logic of the institution. Another SO^{NL} remarked:

> *Of course, when you're assigned to the CPs (Central Post), you still have the authority to control the doors. But you don't actually get any information about where detainees are going. And to be fair, that's partly on us too. We usually just open the doors as soon as they press the button. They wave their detainee pass, and we assume they've gotten permission from the PO^{NL} on the unit.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 5)

This normalization of passivity not only disrupts routinized forms of security but also impedes the development of working relationships that previously emerged through structured interactions. As Crawley (2004a) and Liebling et al. (2011) suggest, these every day, repeated encounters, such as during escorted movements, are crucial for cultivating familiarity, authority, and informal control. Without them, relational distance grows and officers are left with fewer opportunities to exercise interpersonal influence or read incarcerated person behaviour effectively. One SO^{NL} reflected on a former institution where escorts were used:

> *As a SO^{NL}, you accompanied the detainee from one location to another, which gave you control over their movement. You'd also gradually get to know who they were. Here, by contrast, you see detainees 'shopping,' so to speak, moving from the remand centre to the prison, then trying to enter a unit there. And as a SO^{NL} you have no idea whether that detainee actually belongs there, because you can't possibly recognize 400 different people by face. And now... yeah, it just feels like there's no real structure.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 3)

The loss of procedural embeddedness is described by several SO^{NL}s as contributing to an erosion of control. In their accounts, increased incarcerated person autonomy of movement under IMD creates uncertainty and operational friction, as established routines, communication flows, and checkpoints are dismantled. From this perspective, the absence of reliable information about incarcerated persons whereabouts undermines situational awareness and, with it, confidence in responding effectively to emerging situations. These perceptions also shape inter-staff dynamics. In Prison C, SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL}s operate under different expectations: SO^{NL}s tend to view PO^{NL}s as too willing to override regulations, while PO^{NL}s may see SO^{NL}s as inflexible and overly rule-bound. This tension is heightened under IMD, where discretion over movement becomes a site of contestation. For SO^{NL}s, much of their emotional labour is directed toward navigating such interprofessional friction. The following excerpt illustrates how one SO^{NL} frames these dynamics:

> *I'm watching the landing, and suddenly I see detainees just walking around, moving freely between sections. No call, no heads-up, nothing. PO^{NL}s just let them out, like it's their personal decision to make. And then I'm the one who has to deal with it, figuring out why they're out, if they have permission, if they're supposed to be somewhere. It's a security risk, but somehow, we're the ones who look bad when we try to enforce the actual rules. You're constantly disputing with one another.*
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Quote SO^{NL}, February 16, 2023)

While the account underscores the SO^{NL}'s sense of being placed in a reactive, enforcement role, it also reflects a role-based framing in which procedural order is prioritised over relational discretion. Other officers, particularly PO^{NL} may interpret the same situation as a legitimate use of discretion in line with IMD's goals. The friction, then, lies not solely in rule-breaking or communication lapses, but in divergent occupational logics about what constitutes safe and legitimate practice.

In contrast, the Dutch Prison D represents a setting where the authority and relevance of SO^{NL}s is reinforced rather than diminished. The presence of incarcerated persons classified as *Escape and/or Societal Risk Detainees* (ESRD), necessitates heightened security procedures (Roks et al., 2024). Movement within the prison is tightly regulated, and incarcerated persons cannot leave the unit without direct approval and coordination with SO^{NL}s in the Central Post (CP). This restores their gatekeeping role and affirms their importance within the institutional order. The constant communication and supervision required in such an environment aligns more closely with the SO^{NL}s' training and sense of purpose, as outlined in Chapter 4.

> Just as a ESRD detainee was returning from a meeting with his case manager, a movement to the yard from Unit B was about to be initiated. However, all focus shifted to the movement of this one individual, escorted by two PO^{NL}. No other movement was allowed through the central corridor, as the SO^{NL}s in the CP (Control Post) held off on opening any other doors. This visibly disrupted the usual flow of movement. As soon as the ESRD detainee disappeared down the corridor toward his wing, things picked up again. The group heading to the yard were allowed to pass through the central corridor, as if someone had pressed play after a short pause.
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, June 6, 2023)

This moment illustrates how ESRD-protocols not only solidify but significantly amplify SO^{NL}s' role as central coordinators of controlled movement. Their ability to dictate the sequencing and timing of access grants them a degree of operational authority. In such contexts, the SO^{NL} is no longer merely a procedural actor but becomes a gatekeeper with considerable power over internal movements. The classification of incarcerated persons as ESRD does not simply heighten risk, it legitimates an expanded field of control for SO^{NL}s. Unlike the blurred boundaries of IMD-oriented regimes, where SO^{NL}s' presence becomes diffuse, ESRD-settings generate an occupational clarity that reinstates their centrality in the penal order.

> *As a SO^{NL}, working here is easier than in another prison. Why? Because from a security standpoint, the application of protocols and rules are easy to justify. And that clarity facilitates routine decision making.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 2)

When rules are stable and their application is easy to justify, SO^{NL}s experience less interpretive burden. This reduces the need for negotiation or improvisation and reinforces a binary, risk-driven logic that aligns with custodial reflexes. In this sense, the "easiness" of working under GVM conditions reflects a broader alignment between institutional architecture and occupational identity, where clarity, hierarchy, and certainty take precedence over discretion, dialogue, or relational work. Moreover, the ease with which these rules are defended both internally and externally narrows the space for contestation, offering officers a form of bureaucratic protection that simultaneously empowers and shields them.

> *And it also depends on who's leaving the unit. If you know who's going to the yard, and say it's someone from Unit B or C, you know, okay, that's that ESRD detainee, you've got to keep an eye on him, because that needs to be logged. Here at the CP, we keep a full record of where each ESRD detainee has been. And no doors are opened if there are no PO^{NL}r escorting the ESRD-detainee.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 3)

Monitoring GVMs becomes a central task through which institutional logic and occupational identity align. SO^{NL}s do not simply enforce risk classifications, they actively sustain them through individualized observation and documentation. The SO^{NL}'s knowledge of 'who goes where' and under what conditions becomes a form of operational capital.

> *Here, the principle is that for every detainee, the CP should be called. He's going there, he's going there, so we, the CP, are informed. And technically, the CP is not supposed to open the door if they haven't been notified. So the responsibility lies with both sides. If you haven't been told anything, you can decide for yourself: 'I haven't heard anything, so I'm keeping the door closed.' So yes, it's still your own responsibility.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 1)

The obligation to wait for a call is formal, but the decision to open a door, or not, is ultimately shaped by the officer's personal reading of the situation. This highlights how power is exercised not only through protocol but through interpretive authority, where SO^{NL}s are positioned as both rule-followers and frontline interpreters of risk. Their discretion becomes institutionalized, yet remains grounded in individual accountability, reinforcing their embedded role within the prison's moral and procedural order.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how the occupation of SO^{NL}s is not monolithic but deeply context dependent. Incarcerated person classification and internal policy decisions, such as IMD or ESRD designations, have a formative impact on how SO^{NL}s perceive their role, exert authority, and cope with the demands of their work. In one setting, the role is diluted and emotionally disconnected, in the other, it is intensified and reinforced. These findings underscore the need to understand prison officers as embedded within specific prison ecologies (i.e. spaces where people, resources, and the built environment are interrelated (Tamatea, Day & Cooke, 2023)), where routine, risk, and responsibility intersect in highly differentiated ways.

5.4 INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS, EMOTIONAL COPING, AND OFFICER SOLIDARITY IN DUTCH PRISONS

While the formal role of PO^{NL} emphasizes dynamic engagement with incarcerated individuals, their experiences in Prison C and Prison D diverge in important ways due to differing institutional policies and security classifications. In Prison C, PO^{NL} operate in an environment shaped by IMD. In contrast, Prison D introduces a more rigid yet straightforward security context through the presence of ESRD-incarcerated persons, whose classification as high-risk imposes strict movement protocols and elevated vigilance. While the overall security level is higher, the clear-cut rules and structured procedures offer less ambiguity in daily operations. PO^{NL} here are tasked with regular escort duties and must coordinate closely with security staff to manage ESRD transfers, which can interrupt normal routines but leave less room for discretionary judgment compared to the more fluid environment in Prison C.

These institutional differences not only structure the formal responsibilities of PO^{NL} but also shape how they experience emotional strain and where they turn for support. While both SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL} experience strain from these policies, they cope with and express these pressures at different times. Emotional support is mostly drawn from their fellow group, either being PO^{NL}s or SO^{NL}s. During fieldwork in Dutch prisons, one striking observation was the clear division between SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL} in the staff canteen. Despite working within the same institution, they rarely sat together during lunch breaks, opting instead to gather among their own groups, either in the canteen or on the landing.

At first glance, this division may seem incidental or merely a matter of social preference, but on the other hand, it also reveals how emotional labour extends beyond interactions with detained persons and into the internal culture of each prison officer group, one shaped by different expectations, role perceptions, and professional identities (Bruhn et al., 2010). Lunch breaks serve as important moments for emotional recharge. These moments appear to be particularly significant for PO^{NL} compared to SO^{NL}s, as the latter are often already physically separated from the prison population throughout the day and have more opportunities to interact freely with colleagues and express their frustrations. In contrast, PO^{NL} remain to a large extend directly available to detained persons, addressing their questions and concerns throughout the daily program, leaving fewer opportunities for uninterrupted peer interaction and emotional decompression. Moreover, the underlying sources of frustration are generally not the same. SO^{NL}s draw emotional support from peers who understand the frustrations of maintaining rigid control in an environment where PO^{NL} sometimes apply discretion inconsistently. While for PO^{NL} it is mainly about complex social interactions and exercising situational judgment. This makes their lunch break not just a physical break from duties but also an emotional outlet, where they can share experiences and discuss detained persons behaviour. As a PO^{NL} explained in that regard:

> *"I don't think it's intentional, but yeah, we don't really mix during breaks. They sit with their group, and we sit with ours. It's just easier that way. When we're with other PO^{NL}, we can share ideas about our job more freely, about specific detainees or problems, about what worked or didn't work that day. When you sit with SO^{NL}s, you always feel like you must justify yourself. Like, why did you let that detainee do this, why did you allow that? It's exhausting. We do things differently, and at some point, you just don't want to keep explaining it."*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 8)

However, for PO^{NL}, emotional stress does not always wait for structured moments like lunch breaks to be processed. Most of the times these situations are handled immediately within the team. PO^{NL}, like PO^{BE}s, must regulate their emotions in real time, balancing composure with the demands of maintaining order. However, at times this regulation is no longer sustainable, particularly when faced with repeated defiance, hostility, or incidents that challenge the authority of the PO^{NL}. The following account illustrates how a PO^{NL}, overwhelmed by frustration, seeks an immediate outlet for emotional release, highlighting the precarious balance between professional restraint and personal reaction.

> A PO^{NL} enters the break room, visibly overwhelmed with emotion. A senior PO^{NL} follows shortly after to let him vent. There has been ongoing tension between him and an incarcerated individual. The latter had left his cell despite being on a basic program, and the PO^{NL} confronted him and sent him back to his cell. In response, the incarcerated individual grabbed the PC from the desk

> and threw it to the ground. No alarm was raised at that point. Another PO^{NL} escorted him back to his cell to prevent a direct confrontation between the two. Once the break room door is closed, the PO^{NL} explodes: *"I've had it with that guy, seriously. This is unacceptable. If they want to act like fucking assholes, then I'll be the biggest asshole in here."* The senior PO^{NL} responds calmly: *"Well, let's not rush into anything."* The PO^{NL} counters: *"Do nothing? We should get him put in isolation immediately. You just don't do that, that's our equipment! What kind of message are we sending if we don't respond to this?"* A few days earlier, another incarcerated person had smashed a keyboard on the ground. The PO^{NL} continues: *"When everything opens up again, I'm hitting the alarm. That way they can't go to their walk. It's time we take back control."* Marte doesn't seem to object. As soon as the lunch break is over the alarm is activated, and the rest of the incarcerated persons are unable to go on their walk.
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Observation, February 1, 2023)

His comment reveals the breakdown of emotional regulation, where his personal feelings began to override professional expectations. As a senior officer, Marte adopts a more controlled approach, embodying a higher level of emotional labour by attempting to de-escalate the PO^{NL}'s anger. However, the lack of active objection to the PO^{NL}'s proposed course of action suggests that even senior staff may struggle with balancing professional decorum and the perceived need for punitive responses. The narrative reveals how repeated incidents (e.g., the earlier destruction of a keyboard) accumulate, leading to heightened stress and a reduced capacity for rational decision-making. The frustration reflects a breaking point, where the strain of his role undermines his ability to maintain professionalism The aggressive rhetoric and the decision to misuse the alarm system to enforce punishment reflect a moment of emotional overflow and a shift toward depersonalization, where incarcerated person's risk being seen less as individuals and more as problems to be controlled. At the same time, the destruction of prison property – such as throwing a computer to the ground – is an incident that understandably provokes strong emotional responses. The issue lies not in acknowledging the severity of the act, but in how the staff member's frustration bypasses established procedures and deliberation, opting instead for a unilateral punitive response. This illustrates how accumulated stress and perceived loss of control can undermine professional judgment, especially when informal group dynamics discourage open contestation among colleagues. Moreover, it illustrates the complex power dynamics in prisons, where staff must balance maintaining authority with ensuring fairness and legitimacy in their actions. Imposing collective punishment highlights a misuse of power, potentially eroding perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Research on organizational justice (Tyler, 2006) suggests that perceptions of unfair treatment can exacerbate tension and lead to further conflict, undermining the stability of the prison environment. The lack of objection to the plan may reflect either agreement or a reluctance to confront a colleague, highlighting the potential for group solidarity among staff to reinforce problematic behaviours.

However, incidents like these were rare. PO$^{\text{NL}}$ were generally quick to recognize the need to regulate both their own emotions and those of detained individuals, resolving tensions through dialogue. When the risk of escalation arose, other PO$^{\text{NL}}$ from the same team would take the initiative to separate the involved officer and incarcerated person. Teams that were well-coordinated in this regard tended to maintain a more positive climate within the unit, fostering both a stronger sense of control and more effective communication among colleagues.

> While talking to a PO$^{\text{NL}}$(1), a sudden burst of shouting erupts behind us. We both turn to see PO$^{\text{NL}}$(2) firmly holding back a detainee(1) near the officers' desk. Within seconds, the alarm is raised, and all detainees are ordered back to their cells. The unit is momentarily locked down, restoring order to the wing. As the situation settles, all PO$^{\text{NL}}$ from the unit gather in the breakroom to discuss what happened. Detainee(1) had tried to punch detainee(2). He was still wet, barefoot, and had clearly just come from the shower. The officer who intervened, PO$^{\text{NL}}$(2), explains that he deliberately restrained himself from taking the detainee to the ground, knowing that doing so would only escalate the situation further. The others nod in agreement. The group decides that both detainees involved need to be spoken to separately to understand what led to the incident. However, the team unanimously agrees that PO$^{\text{NL}}$(2) should not be the one to conduct these conversations, as his prior physical involvement in the incident could influence the detainees' responses. Instead, PO$^{\text{NL}}$(1) and PO$^{\text{NL}}$(3) will assume the role of mediators to ensure a neutral approach. Through further discussion, it becomes clear that the incident originated when detainee(2) opened the shower door while detainee(1) was inside. When detainee(1) asked him to close it, detainee(2) responded with a smile, stating that it was acceptable because he liked men. This remark provoked detainee(1), who reacted aggressively, insisting that he himself does not. Detainee(2) later added that he had only been joking.
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, June 22, 2023)

While coordinated teamwork and emotional regulation allow PO$^{\text{NL}}$ to prevent unnecessary escalation, moments of crisis still arise, requiring officers to respond quickly while maintaining control over their own reactions. Physical interventions are sometimes unavoidable, yet officers must continuously assess whether their actions will de-escalate the situation or further inflame tensions. The aftermath of such incidents is just as important as the immediate response – how officers reflect, discuss, and emotionally process these events determines the broader unit climate. The response to Andrés' attempted assault on Igor exemplifies how team coordination and emotional restraint play a role in containing an immediate conflict and ensuring that follow-up actions remain professional and measured. Rather than allowing frustration to dictate decisions, the PO$^{\text{NL}}$ make a collective choice to assign neutral mediators and address the underlying tensions between the incarcerated persons. This approach not only prevents further hostilities but also reinforces professional norms that prioritize control through structured responses rather than personal retaliation. However, not all crisis situations involve direct aggression or conflict between detained persons. Some require officers to manage unpredictable behaviour stemming from intoxication, mental health crises, or self-harm risks – scenarios that demand a different kind of emotional labour. PO^{NL} mainly rely on coordinated teamwork to prevent unnecessary escalation. When conflicts arise, they assess the situation together, distribute roles, and make collective decisions to resolve tensions. Their approach prioritizes structured responses over immediate punitive measures, ensuring conflicts are handled professionally rather than emotionally. Even in moments of physical intervention, the focus remains on maintaining control and preventing further hostilities. Importantly, the aftermath of such incidents is given as much attention as the immediate response. Officers discuss the situation, reflect on their actions, and ensure their handling of the event aligns with professional norms. This process helps maintain a stable unit climate where emotional regulation and debriefing are institutionalized.

While moments of high tension and immediate danger necessitate a serious and controlled response, other incidents create a space where PO^{NL} navigate stress through humour and camaraderie, using shared jokes and light-heartedness as coping mechanisms in an otherwise rigid and high-pressure environment. The following account highlights one such instance: an incident where an intoxicated incarcerated person's erratic behaviour disrupts the unit, leading to a lockdown and an IBT (Internal Support Team) response. As officers accompany the detained person to the hospital, their interactions reflect the fluidity of emotional labour in prison work – shifting between crisis management, humour, and professional detachment.

> The alarm sounds in the facility (Prison C). On the low-security unit, it is reported that a man is under the influence of a mixture of disinfectant and orange juice. The IBT (Internal Support Team) is called, and emergency services are notified. Everyone is confined to their cells, and no activities are allowed to proceed. Willem asks if I would like to accompany a bus from the IBT to the hospital, where they plan to determine whether the man's stomach needs to be pumped. I decide to join Willem. In the bus, jokes quickly start circulating about the man's condition: *"He's completely drunk himself senseless."* To which someone responds: *"He even drank himself off the unit. He's going back to the basic program after this stunt."* Once at the hospital, the IBT is expected to handle security. From the hallway, I hear a PO^{NL} Willem talking with the incarcerated individual. PO^{NL}: *"Well, I've got to hand it to you, this is a new low, even for you. What was the plan, exactly?"*. The incarcerated person (slurring): *"My man! Plan? No plan. Just vibes… I was feeling great until you guys locked me up. Killed the whole mood."*. PO^{NL}: *"Yeah, we're real party crashers. But don't worry, the hospital has great room service."* Incarcerated person: *"Do they serve cocktails?"* PO^{NL}: *"Not the kind you're used to."* Incarcerated person: *"Shame."* A second later, he abruptly falls asleep and starts snoring, loudly and unapologetically. The PO^{NL}s burst into laughter, shaking their heads at the sheer absurdity of it all.
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Observation, March 2, 2023)

Humour emerges as a coping strategy for the PO^{NL}, helping to mitigate stress and foster camaraderie, as demonstrated by their jokes during the transit to the hospital. However, this also underscores the delicate balance between humour that reinforces resilience and humour that risks reinforcing power asymmetries or exclusionary dynamics. Willem's informal engagement with the incarcerated person reflects an adept use of informal authority, blending empathy with control to de-escalate tensions. This interaction, culminating in shared laughter, fosters a moment of mutual humanization despite the hierarchical context. The scenario highlights how humour, relational authority, and formal crisis management protocols converge to maintain order and effectively resolve high-pressure situations. It further emphasizes the importance of balancing empathy and professionalism in officer-incarcerated person interactions to ensure relational dynamics support, rather than compromise, fairness and institutional integrity.

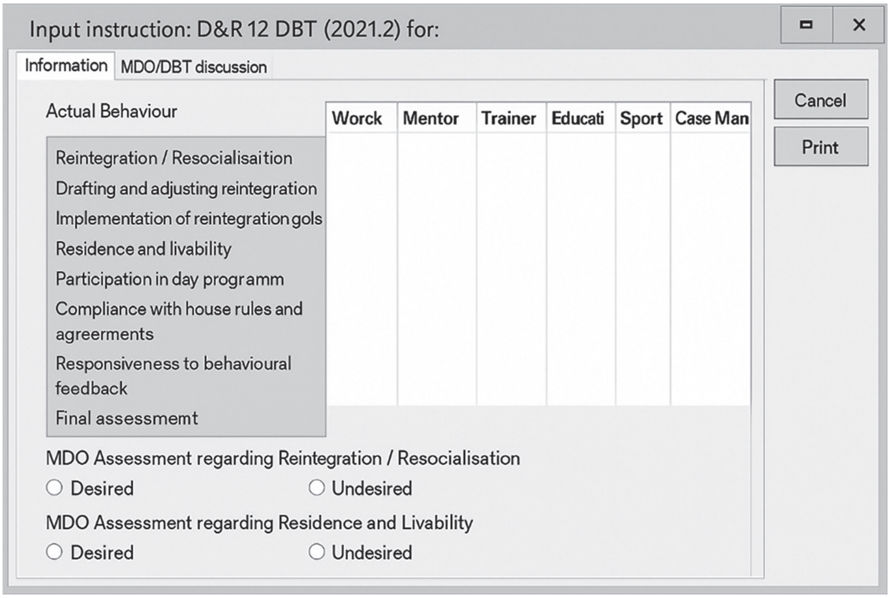
5.5 Prison Officer Participation in Promotion and Demotion

5.5.1 Inside the Multidisciplinary Team: Who's at the table?

Within the Dutch prison system, the Promotion and Demotion (P&D) framework is administered through the multidisciplinary committee (*Multidisciplinair Overlegorgaan* (MDO)). This committee is tasked with assessing incarcerated individuals' behaviour and progress toward reintegration. A standard MDO composition includes the chairperson (typically the head of the prison unit), the case managers responsible for the individuals under review during the six-weekly evaluation cycle, labour officers, and – when deemed necessary – psychological or medical professionals. Crucially, the MDO also includes the mentor of the incarcerated individual, a residential prison officer (PO^{NL}) (Elbers, 2024). Collectively, these actors contribute to a comprehensive assessment of the incarcerated person's trajectory and determine their eligibility for placement in either the Basic or the Plus regime.

However, the practical implementation of the MDO-model varies across the two studied institutions. In the two Dutch prisons examined in this study, contrasting institutional configurations reveal significant divergences in how the role of the PO^{NL} is operationalized within the P&D system. In Prison C, an institutional downsizing of the MDO structure has occurred. Due to persistent staff shortages, making it increasingly difficult to sustain the daily regime, the MDO has been streamlined. As a consequence, only the head of the work unit and the relevant case managers participate in the decision-making meetings regarding regime transitions. They are administratively supported by ICT-staff (i.e. Information and Communication) from the back office, who is responsible for updating the digital Detention and Reintegration (D&R) file.

Despite their exclusion from the formal MDO deliberations, PO^{NL}'s continue to play a key role in the behavioural assessment process. As mentors, they are tasked with conducting regular evaluations and supplying crucial information concerning an individual's participation, conduct, and engagement with the daily program. However, their input is now limited to a color-coded evaluation (i.e. undesirable behaviour is red, while desirable is green; see figure) of the various domains, with additional written documentation uploaded to the digital D&R system. They no longer provide in-person clarification during MDO sessions on the assessments they have made over the preceding six-week period. This structural change effectively curtails the direct input of the staff members who are arguably most closely attuned to the daily realities and behavioural developments of incarcerated individuals. While this leaner model is intended to optimize limited staffing resources, it simultaneously erodes the foundations of the P&D process.



Actual Behaviour	Worck	Mentor	Trainer	Educati	Sport	Case Man
Reintegration / Resocialisaition						
Drafting and adjusting reintegration						
Implementation of reintegration gols						
Residence and livability						
Participation in day programm						
Compliance with house rules and agreerments						
Responsiveness to behavioural feedback						
Final assessmemt						

MDO Assessment regarding Reintegration / Resocialisation
○ Desired ○ Undesired

MDO Assessment regarding Residence and Livability
○ Desired ○ Undesired

Figure 10. Assessment tab of digital P&D-tool in D&R

> *"The new internal MDO format weakens the process of gathering and integrating the information needed to connect the PO^{NL}'s behavioural observations with the formal case file. Without them present at the meetings, we lose valuable contextual information"*
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Quote Casemanager, November 2023)

> *"Because there is a certain gap between what PO^{NL}'s formally report in writing and what they informally share during conversation."*
>
> (Prison C, Fieldnotes, Quote Casemanager , December 2023)

This speaks not merely to a logistical flaw, but to a deeper epistemological rupture within the architecture of prison decision-making. At its core, there is a tension between *lived knowledge* and *documented knowledge* – between what is seen, felt, and interpreted in the relational space of the prison unit, and what is ultimately crystallized in the official records that determine a incarcerated person's status. The PO^{NL}, as a frontline actor, occupies a position of proximity: they witness micro-moments of attitude, shifts in tone, the subtle rhythms of routine and rupture. Their knowledge is often affective, situational, and temporal – not always easily captured in metrics or forms. As one PO^{NL} explained:

> *Now we simply colour the boxes, red or green, and you add a few comments, if you have any. Which they don't read, and that's it. But back then, [when PO$^{NL's}$ were still physically present at the MDO in prison C] if there was a deviation somewhere, if someone scored as undesirable, as red, then they [MDO-members] would ask: 'How come? Why did it happen? Did he receive a warning, or was there a report written, or whatever...' That's the difference. And now? I don't know how they manage that now.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 8)

When the structure of the MDO no longer allows space for this kind of knowledge to emerge – when it fails to support the transition from informal observation to formal recognition – something essential is lost. The very mechanisms meant to elaborate on subtleties instead render certain insights invisible. If the voice of the PO^{NL} is no longer verbally carried through the system to other MDO-members, the prison risks becoming a place where truth is defined not by how it is contextualized, but only by what is digitally recorded. A PO^{NL} who observes but cannot speak – or speaks without being heard – is cut adrift from the rapport building aspects with incarcerated persons.

By contrast, Prison D continues to maintain a more comprehensive MDO model. Here, PO^{NL}'s formally participate in the six-weekly MDO meetings, although, for pragmatic reasons, only one PO^{NL} is delegated per session. This selective participation is likewise driven by the operational imperative of maintaining the daily program on the wings. The presence of an PO^{NL} nonetheless ensures that behavioural nuances – often absent from digital reporting or administrative summaries – are introduced into the deliberative process. In such settings, the PO^{NL} role extends beyond functional assessment to include interpretive framing of the incarcerated person's behaviour within a broader institutional and social context.

The divergence between these two institutional models highlights the tensions faced by prison administrations in balancing security imperatives with rehabilitative ambitions. Although the P&D framework is formally standardized at the policy level, the practical involvement of PO^{NL}'s as mentors in MDO deliberations is shaped by locally contingent factors, including staffing constraints and managerial priorities. These variations carry significant implications for how principles of behavioural assessment are translated into everyday prison practice.

> Today's MDO meeting was attended by a policy advisor from the Dutch Prison Service (DJI). For the duration of the session, as several incarcerated individuals were evaluated in sequence, the advisor remained silent. He only took notes, and did not interrupt. Only after the last individual had been discussed did he turn to the chair of the MDO to ask a question:
>
> *"If I may, your system for determining whether someone qualifies for the Basic or Plus program seems quite structured. But, where's the follow-up? I don't hear any discussion about setting goals for these men, red nor green."*
>
> The chair of the MDO argues*: "That part's for the PO^{NL}s. They're the ones who sit down with the guys and work on those goals."*
>
> The advisor frowns. *"That might cover for behaviour on the unit, sure. But I mean more generally. I hear a lot about what's going wrong. But what about the ones who are doing well? Don't they get new goals? Are you building on their progress? It seems like you're only doing halve of what the system entails?"*
>
> There was a brief pause. The chair of the MDO exhaled, visibly trying to remain diplomatic but clearly frustrated.
>
> *"If I had to go through every single report, discuss every detainee in full detail, we'd be in MDO all day long. That's just not realistic. We've got other responsibilities, other meetings. I don't even have enough staff to attend the meeting to begin with. What we do here is make sure each guy gets a proper evaluation so the file's complete. That's already a job in itself. That's what we're able to give."*
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, July 27, 2023)

5.5.2 The Six-Week Penal Clock: Soft Power and Temporal Orientation

However, this by no means implies that PO^{NL}'s play no role in the system of promotion and demotion. The reporting expected of them fits within what Crewe (2011, p. 456) describes as *"soft power"* and *"governing at a distance."* What happens on the landing/wing is observed and reported by PO^{NL}'s, with the actual decisions being made from a distance and less directly visible in the everyday life of the wings. As Crewe (2011, p. 465) stated: *"The power of the pen is potent precisely because it is enduring and cannot be erased".* In the promotion and demotion system, the temporal dimension of *enduring* Crewe refers to becomes more systematic – *"like a snake biting its own tail"* (Prison D, quote from incarcerated person, August 2023). The assessment of behaviour is structured around fixed moments, which are determined by an individual's position within the recurring six-week cycle. The six-week evaluation cycle introduces a structured temporal rhythm into the operations of PO^{NL}'s . This administrative device has profound implications for how attention, monitoring, and behavioural assessments are distributed across the incarcerated population. One officer illustrates this dynamic:

> *"That six-week cycle is linked to the moment they enter the facility, so it's different for everyone. As a result, you pretty much have someone up for review every week. And yeah, your attention naturally shifts more toward that person. You keep a slightly closer eye on them, simply because you know their assessment is coming up. It's not that you ignore the others, but it does steer your focus a bit."*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 4)

Although the P&D system appears uniform in design, its staggered application produces asynchronous oversight: since each individual's cycle is usually anchored to their date of entry (or in case of unacceptable behaviour, which results in immediate demotion and the start of a new cycle), someone is always nearing an evaluation point. This means that institutional attention is not distributed evenly, but rather follows a rotational logic, clustering around the person whose assessment is imminent. Custodial attention therefor isn't solely event-driven (i.e. tied to risk, behaviour, or incident), but also to the bureaucratic calendar. What emerges could best be described as a temporal architecture of surveillance, where visibility and scrutiny are modulated by institutional time rather than by continuous or holistic observation. Surveillance, in this configuration, is not omnipresent but episodic and anticipatory. This has direct consequences for how behavioural knowledge is produced, preserved, and acted upon. A second officer elaborates on how the evaluation process is operationalized:

> *"Six weeks is a long time. So at the time of reporting I take a look whether there've been any reports from colleagues about someone's behaviour. It's a bit of a cut-and-paste job. And often, you only really take into account what happened recently. Like, if there was something minor at the start of the cycle but everything else went fine, you're not going to come down hard now. Unless if it's clearly part of a pattern across multiple cycles. Then you can say, 'Hey, you always do this. You cause some trouble early on, and then suddenly act polite and correct when the assessment gets closer.' Those are some things you take into account. But, which you also have to write down consequently."*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO^{NL} 11)

The statement offers a glimpse into the archival nature of carceral power, which '*cannot be erased*' (Crewe, 2011, p.465). Assessments on incarcerated persons are shaped by what has been documented and can be substantiated through formal channels. The process is described as a "cut-and-paste job," underscoring the highly proceduralized and mechanical nature of evaluations. Staff rely on fragmented accounts of conduct, often mediated through written reports compiled by others. In doing so, they depend on a bureaucratically constructed form of assessment and less on an interpersonal one. This temporal concentration echoes Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) concept of the surveillant assemblage. Not only in its fragmented and multi-sourced nature but also in the way individual subjects are intermittently reassembled into evaluable profiles. Surveillance here is punctuated, clustering around institutional rhythms like the upcoming assessment. In this sense, time acts as a structuring force, producing a temporal assemblage of visibility. Officers become more attuned to particular prisoners not because of current risk or conduct, but because of temporal proximity to a formal review.

Officers may witness or intuit behavioural patterns, but these insights must be translatable into institutional language to have formal weight. Giddens' (1984) notion of the duality of structure is instructive here: while officers produce the documentation that structures institutional decisions, they are simultaneously constrained by the very forms they help create. Misconduct that is not documented is functionally invisible, it cannot serve as the basis for action. As such, officers operate within a framework where decisions must be institutionally defensible. One officer reflects on how this cycle interacts with the lived experience of long-term incarcerated persons:

> *"Don't forget: these assessments come up every six weeks. For someone who's in for years, it gets pretty repetitive. They're basically living here, they know the rules better than I do by now. Some have already completed all the reintegration modules, so what are you really going to say? If you start nitpicking over small things, they'll pick up on that right away. And they can make your job a lot harder if they want to. So yeah, you weigh it up: is it worth it? Most of the time, it's about wanting to keep the unit stable."*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 17)

This account offers insight into the temporal fatigue that accompanies repeated assessments, particularly for incarcerated persons serving long sentences. What begins as a motivational structure, a six-week cycle designed to promote progress and incentivize good behaviour (Elbers, 2024), gradually loses its traction when there are few tangible milestones left to reach. The officer notes that some have already completed "all the modules," leaving little room for further progression. In such cases, the evaluation process risks becoming hollow, repetitious, or even performative.

The officer's exercise of discretion takes on a tactical character (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Rather than strictly enforcing rules or applying sanctions for every minor infraction, officers weigh their decisions strategically (Haggerty & Becurius, 2020; Tournel, 2015)

This accumulation of insights into the functioning of the six-week cycle – from anticipatory surveillance and fragmented documentation to temporal fatigue and strategic discretion – illustrates that the P&D system is not simply a behavioural feedback loop for PO^{NL}, an institutionalized mode of governance. Its rhythm recalibrates staff attention and anchors documentation practices. Yet this temporal machinery does not operate in a vacuum. It is animated and interpreted through the broader penal rationality within which it is embedded. As Liebling et al. (2020, p.52) suggest, Dutch prison staff tend to adopt a *present-focused* approach, prioritizing everyday order and interpersonal stability over long-term behavioural change. This orientation resonates strongly with how the P&D system is enacted on the ground by PO^{NL}: a tool for managing compliance in the here and now. In this context, discretion is not necessarily guided by a fixed moral principle but shaped by pragmatic considerations – whether intervention is worth the effort, whether it risks disrupting unit cohesion, or whether it maintains the working relationship. The six-week cycle, then, functions not merely as an administrative schedule but as a manifestation of a penal logic rooted in present-focused governance.

5.6 Chapter conclusion

Managing oneself emotionally and psychologically is not only essential in interactions with detained persons but also within peer-to-peer dynamics. Institutional environments, professional identities, and the structural tensions between different officer roles shape how prison officers develop coping mechanisms to navigate the psychological demands of their work, whether through detachment, investment in relationships, or strategic boundary-setting.

The type and intensity of strain are shaped by the structural positioning and relational scope of each officer role. PO^{BE}s in restrictive Belgian regimes, operating under high surveillance and limited incarcerated person movement, often adopt emotional detachment and desensitisation, reinforcing an authoritarian model. In open regimes, by contrast, PO^{BE}s engage in more emotionally invested interactions, negotiating daily between discipline and rehabilitation. PO^{NL} in the Netherlands, embedded in the continuous flow of landing life, must constantly regulate their emotions, shifting between authority, mediation, and de-escalation as situations evolve. SO^{NL}, positioned within a security-first framework and spatially distanced from prisoners, tend to rely on procedural detachment, maintaining order through physical separation and rigid rule enforcement rather than relational engagement. These variations are not incidental, they reflect the organisational logics, policy frameworks, and cultural expectations embedded in each system.

Emotional and psychological strain in prison work extends beyond officer-prisoner interactions and into workplace culture. The structural tensions between SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL} exemplify how strain is also shaped by occupational divides and conflicting work philosophies. SO^{NL}s view PO^{NL} as too lenient, while PO^{NL} see SO^{NL}s as overly rigid and bureaucratic. These differences manifest in everyday disputes over discretionary decision-making, but also in social divisions within breakrooms and professional interactions.

In this sense, is not only about managing detained persons but also about navigating professional environments and peer relationships.

The institutional environment plays a defining role in shaping prison officers’ emotional experiences. The contrast between Prison A (closed, security-focused, detached) and Prison B (open, relational, rehabilitative) underscores how policy and environment impact officer wellbeing and professional identity. Environments that encourage interpersonal engagement, movement, and a sense of autonomy appear to reduce stress and emotional exhaustion, whereas highly restrictive settings foster alienation and burnout.

The contrast between Prison C and Prison D, regarding PO^{NL}s, reveals more than different approaches to behavioural assessment: it exposes the fragility of occupational identity when institutional structures fail to recognize the value of relational knowledge. As frontline officers, PO^{NL}s derive professional meaning not only from executing tasks, but from being embedded in the interpretive processes that define what progress, compliance, or rehabilitation *means* within the prison. In Prison C, the removal of PO^{NL}s from MDO deliberations signals a shift in institutional orientation: one that prioritizes formal documentation over situated understanding. While this may serve short-term efficiency, what might be its long-term consequences? Emotional labour, once rooted in interaction, trust-building, and behavioural nuance, is bureaucratized into colour codes and digital uploads, decoupling observation from interpretation. In such contexts, PO^{NL}s risk becoming mere procedural operators, tasked with observing but no longer empowered to contextualize or explain what they see. Their authority is thinned, and their sense of professional purpose destabilized. What is lost is not only information, but the connective tissue between prison work and meaning-making.

By contrast, Prison D shows that even minimal PO^{NL}s participation can preserve a sense of continuity between everyday practice and institutional decision-making. Their presence at the MDO does not simply “add context”; it affirms their role as co-producers of penal knowledge. The deeper insight here is that occupational identity in prison work is not self-evident or stable, it is continuously shaped by whether institutions *listen to* or *extract from* those at the frontline. Exclusion from deliberative structures undermines the relational foundations of prison officer professionalism and signals a broader epistemological narrowing: one where quantifiable data takes precedence over the situated, affective labour that actually holds the prison together. If prison administrations continue down the path of procedural streamlining without institutional recognition of this labour, they risk cultivating a workforce that is not only emotionally exhausted, but existentially disoriented – present in body, absent in voice, and unsure of what their presence still means.

6

Between Us and Them: The Texture of (Dis)connected Space

The previous chapter explored the emotional landscapes and occupational identities of prison officers by examining how they think, feel, and act in their daily routines. It highlighted how professional selves are negotiated in interaction with colleagues, detained persons, and institutional structures. It showed how prison work operates within tainted fields, not merely physically or socially, but psychologically. Crucially, the chapter demonstrated that such burdens are refracted through institutional architectures and policy: PO$^{\mathrm{BE}}$’s in closed Belgian institutions experienced fragmentation and emotional retreat, their counterparts in the open Prison B described a more relational and affirming sense of self.

SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$ and PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$, in turn, navigated contrasting challenges rooted in their embedded roles and prison ecologies (Lerman & Page, 2012; Tamatea, Day, & Cooke, 2023) SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$’s felt disconnected and uncertain when operational control was hollowed out, but had their authority reinforced in tightly structured regimes with clear boundaries and routines. PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$’s, tasked with face-to-face interactions on the landing, dealt with emotionally charged encounters and internal role tensions. Their ability to sustain their role depended on strong team cohesion, stable expectations, and mutual role recognition among colleagues. Both groups relied on discretionary judgment to manage everyday uncertainty, whether deciding when to tighten or loosen control, or how to interpret and respond to incarcerated persons behaviour, but the space and legitimacy for using discretion varied by role and regime. In both cases, officers drew on shared, experience-based knowledge of how to navigate the prison’s emotional and relational terrain, yet its effectiveness varied depending on the institutional context. In short, the role of the prison officer emerged not as fixed or uniform, but as situated, contingent, and deeply felt.

This chapter builds on those insights but shifts analytical gears by introducing *proximity* as a central lens. Following Jefferson and Gaborit (2015), proximity is not merely spatial closeness or frequency of contact, but a relational condition that captures how officers and incarcerated people co-inhabit institutional space. Proximity highlights the ways in which authority, recognition, and emotional labour are structured, challenged, and negotiated. It invites us to see the prison as a relational institution, in which officers and detained persons occupy shared yet asymmetrical social and emotional worlds (Crewe, 2009; Garrihy, 2024). By reframing prison officer practices through proximity, we move beyond essentialist notions of role to examine how forms of closeness and distance are produced and experienced across different contexts. These differences are often mediated by institutional atmospheres, understood as the affective and sensory climate that shapes how staff and incarcerated persons experience daily life within the prison (Turner & Peters, 2015); by architectural configurations, referring to the physical layout, openness, and visibility within prison spaces that influence interaction and control (Beijersbergen et al., 2016); and by prison ecologies, which encompass the broader interplay between physical environment, institutional culture, and social relations within a given penal setting (Crewe et al., 2014; Tamatea, Day, & Cooke, 2023).The aim here is to understand how officers manage their risks and possibilities within structurally unequal, emotionally charged environments.

This chapter thus reconceptualizes prison officers as relational actors embedded in entangled carceral spaces. Their work is not solely defined by tasks of custody or care, but by how they navigate proximity, how they are pulled into or pushed away from relationships under pressure, and how those relational negotiations shape both their authority and wellbeing. If we go beyond understanding spaces through their spatial qualities, we can understand them as inviting or allowing or disallowing particular roles and relations. In other words, spaces offer certain possibilities or limitations to its occupants. Through this lens, the comparison of prison officers across Belgian and Dutch institutions takes on a new dimension: not just how they feel about their jobs, but how they are positioned in relation to incarcerated persons and other colleagues inside the prison.

6.1 Proximity and the Architecture of Separation

6.1.1 Working Alone, Feeling Apart (Belgian Prison A)

Jefferson and Gaborit (2015) reconceptualize proximity in prison settings not merely as spatial closeness or interpersonal contact, but as a relational condition shaped by architecture, routine, policy, and affect. Hillier and Hanson (1998) stated that the way spaces are designed and organized within buildings is not just about physical arrangement but also about shaping social interactions and relationships. The layout of a building, how rooms are connected, the flow of movement, the proximity of spaces, affects how people within that building interact. Proximity, in this view, is lived and negotiated, an ambivalent field of recognition and emotional exposure, which can foster either connection or detachment. However, one of the most defining characteristics of prisons is that of separation, which is the opposite of proximity. Doors, locks, corridors and so on not only demarcate a separation of space but also of people. In Prison A, this ambivalence of proximity is made concrete through officers' metaphors, their embodied experience of space, and their everyday routines.

In the case of Prison A, proximity was heavily shaped, and ultimately constrained, by the telephone pole prison-design (see Chapter 3) and its spatial fragmentation. Officers consistently referred to their units as "islands", a metaphor that captured both physical separation and psychological disconnection by evoking an experience of boundedness, isolation, and immobility. This spatial language resonates directly with Jefferson and Gaborit's (2015) idea that proximity is not simply about sharing space, but about how that space is inhabited relationally.

As one officer put it:

> *This (telephone pole) layout is rubbish, bad and poorly thought out. They call these units islands because no one ever comes here.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 5)

Despite working in what was officially one of the largest prisons in Belgium, PO^{BE}s described their units as small, bounded, and remote. These descriptions affirm Jefferson and Gaborit's argument that proximity is not determined by geometry but by felt and social space. A physically short distance can still yield isolation when the space discourages visual, auditory, or emotional connection:

> You have to stay there during the shift, and you hardly see anyone. It's a strange feeling indeed. You work with up to a hundred colleagues in the entire prison, and you don't see anyone throughout the day.
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 16)

Here, the PO^{BE} articulates a kind of false proximity: proximity without presence. Though others are technically nearby, the spatial configuration, long corridors, isolated desks, and layered barriers, renders relational connection difficult or impossible. The result is a hollowed-out proximity, in which officers are with others in principle, but without others in practice. Visual and auditory separation reinforces this sense of disconnection: PO^{BE}s noted that even in moments of potential emergency, they could neither see nor hear their colleagues, leaving them to work in a state of heightened vulnerability. As one noted:

> *"You can shout as loud as you want, no one will ever hear it. If something happens, no one will know."*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 5)

In addition to spatial disconnection, if relational proximity among peers is unmanaged or unsupported, it can be corrosive. PO^{BE}s described a shift from a collective "us versus them" culture to a more individualized "me versus them" orientation (Pardon et al., 2025). In these settings, the traditional "us versus them" culture, erodes into a more individualized "me versus them" stance. This shift is not merely rhetorical: it reflects a deeper disruption in how officers experience their role. In the absence of reliable peer support, they come to see their work as an isolated struggle for self-preservation, rather than a collective effort grounded in shared responsibility and camaraderie. Officers described a diminished sense of belonging, fewer opportunities for informal exchange or emotional offloading, and an increased tendency to rely on individual coping strategies. This fragmentation is intensified by architectural and organisational features that limit professional interaction, especially in single-staffed units. As solidarity recedes, PO^{BE}s become more emotionally withdrawn, more procedurally rigid, and more likely to experience both incarcerated persons and colleagues as 'others'. The isolation of officers on their unit, coupled with digital communication tools that replaced face-to-face contact, deepened this alienation:

> *People are more island-oriented. Which actually makes you feel like you're not forming a team together.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 2)

> *Here everyone is on their own. I'm having a hard time with that. Apart from sporadic communication through the intercom, you are working alone.*
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE}, March 17, 2022)

Proximity also reveals how power and recognition are negotiated through the material cohabitation of prison space. In Prison A, PO^{BE}s reported working long shifts alone, with minimal contact with colleagues or detained persons, and with few opportunities for informal engagement. What emerged was not relational proximity, but a form of empty co-presence, a proximity without connection (Johnsen et al., 2023; Evans et al. 2023). While officers were technically near the incarcerated individuals under their care, the combination of reduced activities, policy restrictions, and digital communication (e.g., CCTV, intercoms, in-cell telephony) turned these encounters into distant and reactive moments.

> *Not being able to see colleagues? That does have an effect. But truthfully? You actually hardly come into contact with prisoners. You know, they're constantly in their cells. So that's more of a mental thing than that there would really be no security whatsoever. You only see them when they need something.*
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{BE}, April 20, 2022)

Rather than fostering informal authority or dynamic security, as relational proximity sometimes can, it's absence created structural separation. Not merely shaped by policy or architecture, but also by means of technological communication. Both the internet access for PO^{BE}s and the in-cell telephony provided to incarcerated persons, further diminished the relational dynamics within this prison. While these technologies were generally perceived as enhancing connection to the outside world, they simultaneously weakened proximity within the carceral space itself (Beyens & Geerts, 2024; Mertens et al., 2021; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). PO^{BE}s acknowledged that the internet allowed them to escape, albeit temporarily, from the emotionally and socially restrictive environment of their unit. As one respondent noted:

> *Purely professionally there is no added value of internet access for prison officers. It's nothing more than a means to pass time, make the shift more pleasant. It reduces the gap between prison and the world outside. Before we were basically isolated for eight hours.*
>
> (Prison A, Interview PO^{BE} 16)

This officer's remark highlights a perception of internet access as a form of informal coping, rather than as a professional resource. While digital tools are increasingly integrated into prison governance elsewhere (Robberechts & Beyens, 2020), here, internet use appears untethered from operational or communicative duties. This unrestricted internet access (e.g. social media, streaming platforms or news websites) offered mental reprieve from the isolation of the prison space. However, this digital engagement also carried risks: it contributed to a disengagement from the immediate environment, reduced attentiveness to minor cues or shifts on the unit and undermined vigilance. Simultaneously, the introduction of in-cell telephony for incarcerated persons, while welcomed for its ability to reduce movements, improve order and safety, and strengthen external familial bonds, had the unintended consequence of diluting informal contact between staff and incarcerated individuals. Previously, such contact often occurred around shared resources like telephones on the landings, where prison officers could overhear snippets of emotion, observe behavioral cues, or engage in casual check-ins. The relocation of phone access into private cells eliminated many of these moments of spontaneous, low-stakes interaction, which officers had used to gauge personal state that incarcerated individuals were in. One PO^{BE} reflected on this loss by stating that while in-cell telephony reduced friction, it also meant "you don't see them as much," thereby reducing the affective knowledge required to anticipate or defuse emerging tensions. This erosion of everyday presence challenges the core principles of dynamic security, which relies not only on physical oversight but also on the cultivation of relational familiarity and intuitive judgment (Crewe, 2009; Liebling et al., 2011). As Garrihy (2021) and Crawley (2004) have shown, such proximity enables officers to notice subtle shifts in behaviour, mood, or routine – forms of embodied and emotional knowledge that are central to preventing escalation. In this sense, reducing contact may lower immediate friction, but it simultaneously undermines the informal, preventative forms of control that dynamic security depends on.

These developments did not merely decrease contact; they altered the texture of proximity itself. Officers were now simultaneously digitally connected to the world beyond the prison and increasingly detached from the people within it. What emerged was a form of technologically mediated distance, a proximity in which physical presence persisted, but relational engagement was thinned, depersonalized, and rendered intermittent. Leaving PO^{BE}s and incarcerated individuals into a state of parallel existence.

In this sense, digital technologies restructured the carceral atmosphere: they offered *connection without contact*, *communication without relationship*, and *presence without mutual recognition*. Rather than bridging distances, these tools often reinforced them, contributing to a culture marked not by collective belonging, but by solitary navigation. As such, the digital infrastructure of the prison, while designed to enhance efficiency and autonomy, paradoxically undermined the very relational foundations that proximity, understood as a socio-emotional condition, requires to function meaningfully.

6.1.2 Fixed Distance: Separation as Structure (SO^{NL})

SO^{NL}s operate primarily in a security-oriented capacity, with their labour centring on procedural consistency and physical control. The nature of their work implies a certain emotional distance through an institutionalized form of separation. Proximity, in this context, is not absent by accident, it is actively structured out of the role. SO^{NL}s are largely stationed in parts of the prison that are physically and socially inaccessible to detained persons: gatehouses, control rooms, and observation posts that enable monitoring without engagement. The design features of Prisons C and D reinforce this separation, clearly demarcating spaces for SO^{NL}s from spaces of detained persons, thereby making the physical layout a social barrier in itself (Johnsen et al., 2023). Whereas proximity in prison work implies visibility, familiarity, and negotiated authority, SO^{NL}s labour is defined by absence, anonymity, and procedural control. A role constituted through intentional non-contact. Their authority is not relational but spatialized, exercised through and from distance, behind glass, behind doors, behind screens. For SO^{NL}s, proximity is bounded, brief, and bordered. As such, separation is not simply the inverse of proximity but a mode of carceral practice in its own right. One SO^{NL} described it succinctly:

> *We monitor and we control the buttons. You're not involved in interactions with detainees at that point.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 3)

The absence of incarcerated persons from these spaces is not incidental, it is purposeful, producing a spatial map in which officers remain behind boundaries and incarcerated persons in front of them. As one SO^{NL} in noted:

> *They call it the fishbowl, the CP. Because it offers a 360-degree view of the prison units from behind glass. But you are also sealed off from those units.*
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Quote SO^{NL}, July 20, 2023)

The boundary is visualized but impermeable, producing a form of surveillance that is distant and unidirectional. The emotional dimensions of this spatial logic are equally profound. Officers describe their work not in terms of interaction. There is little incentive, and often little opportunity, to know incarcerated persons as individuals. Several SO^{NL}s even indicated that relational knowledge of incarcerated persons, such as noticing shifts in their mood, routine, or social life, was not part of their function and often left undocumented.

> *I don't have to carry that interaction with me into the next day like PO^{NL}'s do. That's because I don't see them regularly. I don't have that kind of contact with the detainees. And that makes it easier to keep my distance. I'm not here to solve their problems.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 1)

The goal is not to build rapport, but to maintain distance. Such forms of detachment are not simply personal choices but institutionally produced orientations. In the SO^{NL} role, emotional neutrality is not just encouraged, it is constitutive of the function itself. Therefore, the spatial separation of SO^{NL}s also has epistemological effects. SO^{NL}s speak of not knowing who the incarcerated persons are, not knowing what happens on the prison landings and not understanding the reasoning behind decision making of PO^{NL}'s.

> *The information you get is pretty limited. You can see who's hanging out with who, or if someone goes into someone else's cell. But you don't hear anything, not a change in someone's voice. You don't feel if there's tension brewing. You just see movements, that's all.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 5)

This makes the relational absence mutual. Incarcerated persons rarely approach SO^{NL}s, not out of fear, but because the role offers no promise of recognition or support. The prison becomes a space of parallel existence, staff and prisoners cohabiting the same institution, yet living in different experiential worlds.

> *But when you're put on a unit as a SO^{NL}, your job is really just to keep watch. That might mean supervising visits, going along to the yard or to the gym. But stuff like questions about their probation, the MDO, or following up on their cases, I don't know anything about that. And honestly, I just can't help them with it.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 3)

The relationship between SO^{NL}s and incarcerated persons is marked by a structural tension: SO^{NL}s are perceived less as relational actors and more as enforcers of institutional control. Their role positions them as representatives of the system rather than as accessible or supportive figures. This lack of relational engagement fosters distance and, at times, quiet friction, as incarcerated persons may view SO^{NL}s as impersonal gatekeepers – figures who regulate movement but do not engage.

> *There's a clear divide, they see us as the ones who just open doors and say no. We're not the ones they go to when they need help, and honestly. You also see it in the way they look at you, like you're just part of the system that keeps them in check.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview SO^{NL} 1)

This perceived divide reflects not only the functional demarcation of roles within the prison but also the symbolic meanings attached to these roles. Consequently, incarcerated persons tend to withhold emotional or practical appeals from SO^{NL}s, instead directing those toward staff perceived as more relationally engaged, such as PO^{NL}'s or mentors. The visual cues referenced in the quote, "the way they look at you", further illustrate how SO^{NL}s become personifications of the carceral system itself, instilling a sense of otherness. Some SO^{NL}s embrace that position, expressing a clear affinity for the security-oriented, rule-enforcing dimensions of the role.

> *I've done both, and the remand unit, the HVB (i.e. Dutch: Huis van bewaring; English: remand prison/wing) part, yeah, that was more my thing. Everything's more controlled, more strict. And then the first time I had to work with long-term detainees, so, the actual prison section, I just thought, nope, this isn't for me. Way too loose, prisoners can get anything done there. I'd much rather work in a setting that's more black-and-white. And honestly, the security aspect just appeals to me a lot more.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview SO^{NL} 2)

SO^{NL}s not only navigate but at times actively reproduce and prefer social and spatial distance in their interactions with incarcerated persons. This preference is not merely about operational effectiveness but about occupational identity and identifying more with the "security aspect" than with care or relational work. This orientation toward maintaining boundaries is characteristic of how many SO^{NL}s approach interactions with incarcerated persons. Rather than engaging in open or informal contact, they often respond to unsolicited interaction with the strategic use of physical barriers. Doors, corridors, and security checkpoints become more than functional elements: they are material instruments of proximity management, used to delineate space and reinforce roles. The preference for this structured separation, often expressed as a desire for clarity, control, or "black-and-white" working conditions, suggests that many SO^{NL}s understand proximity not as an opportunity for relational engagement, but as a potential threat. Proximity, in this view, must be managed and, when necessary, shut down. As shown in one of the fieldnotes:

> While talking to a SO^{NL} on the landing, who is guiding a technician tasked with fixing a faulty cell door, about his work, we are suddenly approached by a detained person, who, seemingly curious, attempts to insert himself into the conversation. *"Hey, while we're fixing material on the landing, you don't have to be a tourist and come and see how we are doing things,"* the SO^{NL} remarks sharply. His tone is dismissive, laced with sarcasm, clearly signalling that the detained persons presence is unwelcome. The detainee, however, does not seem partic-

> ularly fazed by the comment. He continues to stand there, casually trying to engage in conversation. The SO^{NL}, without hesitation, pulls the door almost shut, leaving just enough space for himself and the technician inside the cell. With the barrier now physically between them, the SO^{NL} firmly states, *"I'll say this one more time, man, move along. This is none of your business."* The detainee shrugs his shoulders turns away, seemingly indifferent.
>
> (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Observation, July 25, 2023)

Yet this security mindset is not solely reactive or situational. In other instances, it takes the form of a heightened attentiveness to the environment and an embodied, almost intuitive anticipation of risk. This can be understood as a form of anticipatory security work, in which suspicion is mobilized proactively rather than in direct response to observable incidents. Rather than relying solely on formal rules or immediate cues, SO^{NL}s draw on accumulated subtle signals that something may be amiss. Just as one officer enacts authority by physically restricting a incarcerated person's access and reinforcing symbolic boundaries, others assert control through perceptiveness and confident interpretation of incarcerated person behaviour. This becomes particularly apparent in the actions of Karlijn, a SO^{NL} who, while no direct confrontation occurs, demonstrates a keen attunement to a change in behavioural patterns during yard time.

> A SO^{NL} enters the team room quickly with a broad smile, heading straight to the window. There has just been a staff changeover for the yard walk. *"There's something off, I can just feel it,"* she says. I ask what she's referring to. *"Don't you see it? Look at how they're walking across the grass, it's like it's Easter today!"* Still not entirely following, I ask for clarification. *"Look, do you see that group at the back? While I was on the yard, they were gesturing to the guys near the edge of the grass. I didn't see anything being thrown over the fence myself, but you can just tell from the way they're acting that something's up. I'd even bet on it."* She stays glued to the window until the alarm suddenly goes off. *"That's the end of yard time, guys, which means the control room caught something on camera."* Everyone is removed from the yard, and during a search by the supervising PO^{NL}'s and SO^{NL}s, a package is found on the grass. *"Told you so! I can always feel it that something isn't right."* She is clearly pleased with the find, as she starts whistling while gathering the various documents that need to be filled out.
>
> (Prison D, Observation, August 15, 2023)

6.2 Proximity and Presence: The Weight of Nearness

6.2.1 Relational Order in Spaces Without Separation (PO^{BE}s Prison B)

In contrast to the security-oriented SO^{NL}s and emotionally distanced environment of Prison A, the PO^{BE}s in the Belgian Prison B and the PO^{NL}'s in Dutch Prisons C & D, operate within an institutional setting defined by continuous interpersonal contact. In that regard, proximity, which captures the spatial, relational and experiential dimensions of prison officer work, can be used to understand how these settings foster interpersonal contact between prison officers (PO^{BE} & PO^{NL}) and incarcerated persons in both countries.

Proximity in Prison B is first and foremost structured by the physical layout and institutional philosophy. Officers are constantly present among incarcerated individuals, particularly in shared spaces such as the prison landing, the stables or the workshops. This continuous exposure to detained persons generates not only familiarity but also a different mode of authority, one based on relational engagement and communicative presence, mostly present on the farm and workshops. As a PO^{BE} explained:

> *Here, you don't really have a choice but to work together with the prisoners… You can't play the role of a traditional prison officer here… Because then the work just doesn't get done. To work in the stables, I have to be able to rely on the prisoners, and they have to be able to rely on me. It's about working together.*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 5)

Power is less imposed through top-down control, but through daily negotiation, embedded in a shared sense of responsibility. PO^{BE}s manage familiarity in the stables and workshops while maintaining professional boundaries. Rather than withdrawing behind professional distance, PO^{BE}s navigate a form of relational authority (Liebling, 2011), where familiarity is not a threat but a resource, carefully managed within the boundaries of their role. Nowhere is this more visible than in the workshop and stable settings, where spatial and symbolic proximity enable a shared rhythm of work, rest, and social interaction.

> It's just after ten o'clock when the activities in the workshop briefly come to a halt. One by one, the men put down their tools. Some stretch their arms, others make their way toward the small office of the PO^{BE} next to the workspace. There stands a thermos and a row of coffee mugs, not the disposable plastic kind, but porcelain cups, some chipped, others with faded logos. I follow, as I notice that the PO^{BE} supervising the workshop also takes a seat at the desk and casually pours herself and the three accompanying detainees a cup of coffee. They all sit together in the same room, as if it were a regular coffee break on a workplace floor outside prison walls. There's some small talk among the men about the upcoming Champions League fixtures. The PO^{BE} says, *"Oh no, can we please talk about something other than football?"* One of the detainees replies, *"Sure, we know a thing or two about cricket as well." "Or water polo,"* another detainee adds. There's laughter, genuine and relaxed.
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Observation, October 4, 2022)

This mundane moment is an expression of proximity as a practice: the embodied, affective co-presence through which authority and trust are established and maintained. This exchange reveals the PO^{BE}'s capacity to be open to social interaction without dissolving the professional frame. The coffee moment is not a break *from* prison work, it *is* prison work, enacted through relational maintenance and affective attentiveness.

This relational mode of working is not limited to informal moments; it also shapes how officers respond to breaches of rules. A case involving an incarcerated individual who tested positive for prohibited substances, highlights this distinction:

> When PO^{BE} announces a particular incarcerated individual's removal from the classroom, another PO^{BE} reacts with surprise, stating, *"What? He? He was doing so well. Where did this come from all of a sudden?"* Both officers express disappointment, with the PO^{BE} elaborating on the consequences for his parole, saying, *"He's lost his privileges here and has to start over from scratch. His entire rehabilitation effort is ruined, and for what? You can feel sorry for him, but still… This feels like a failure."*
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Observation, October 12, 2022).

These responses reveal an emotional investment that exceeds formal obligation. Stef is not viewed as a security breach or file number, but as someone whose rehabilitation had meaning for the officers involved. The removal from the classroom to the security cell, carried out without handcuffs, underscores the relational mode of authority in place, discipline administered with restraint. Authority here is exercised not through force, but through relational capital and mutual understanding (Liebling, 2011). In this open regime, proximity is not merely spatial, it is institutionalized. PO^{BE}s are structurally positioned to interact, to observe, to listen, and to be known. While security remains a baseline concern, the relational environment allows officers to respond with empathy, disappointment, and discretion, emotions that are often bracketed out in more securitized settings (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). This reflects a broader shift observed in relational prison models where officers act less as disciplinarians and more as social agents of change, engaging incarcerated persons as participants rather than subjects of control (King, 2009; De Keyser & Vanhouche, 2019). As one officer put it succinctly:

> *We work with a different mindset, and with a different objective as well. Here, we don't just lock them away behind bars. Whereas, let's be honest, in other prisons it's 'door closed, case closed.' You can just say, 'I'm not dealing with this', and shut the door. But here, that's not an option.*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 1)

This ethos of openness shapes daily interaction in subtle but powerful ways. Take, for example, a quiet moment on the landing:

> It's early afternoon when I return to the landing. The supervising PO^{BE} sits quietly at his desk, observing the unit. A incarcerated person walks over slowly, his voice low and cautious: *"Chef… is it okay if I go to my room? I'm not feeling great."* The officer looks up, gives a short nod, and replies: *"Alright."* No further

> questions. The incarcerated person nods back, says a quiet thanks, and walks up the stairs to his room. The exchange lasts only seconds, but its ease and informality feel telling. The brief nod, the soft tone, they speak to something more structured than they appear. I ask the officer why he still had to ask. He shrugs and says: *"There's still structure. During the day, they're not supposed to go upstairs. But they ask, and I trust them. A nod is enough."*
>
> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Observation, August 30, 2022)

This moment, like the case of positive substance test, reveals a form of authority that is exercised subtly rather than overtly. It is not the absence of control, but its calibrated presence: a nod, a glance, a short reply, all embedded in routine and reciprocal recognition. In this environment, control is not loudly imposed, but sustained through the quiet choreography of daily interaction. PO^{BE}s rely on the emotional capital built through proximity: familiarity, trust, and the credibility that emerges from being consistently present. Their ability to maintain boundaries while remaining approachable and attuned aligns with what is described as a *traditional-professional* or *professional-supportive* officer culture (Crewe et al., 2011; Liebling & Kant, 2016). In such styles, authority is not abandoned but wielded with competence, restraint, and ethical clarity. Rather than acting strictly as custodians of discipline, PO^{BE}s in Prison B function as relational agents, whose legitimacy is grounded in consistency, fairness, and interpersonal knowledge. This form of professionalism departs from the more rigid, control-oriented logics often associated with punitive or resistant cultures. Instead, it reflects a mode of governance where power is negotiated, rather than imposed – a daily practice of balancing vigilance and empathy, one quiet nod at a time. The professional conduct displayed by these officers contrasts sharply with what Schoenfeld and Everly (2022) call the *security mindset*, wherein security becomes the sole organizing principle of professional identity. In the case of Prison B, professionalism is not framed through avoidance or control, but through meaningful engagement – indicating that even PO^{BE}s who used to work in more traditional penal regimes, are able to reflect adaptive, relational, and ethically grounded forms of authority.

Yet, the level of proximity in Prison B is not without its pressures. Unlike traditional prison environments that allow officers to retreat or isolate, Prison B's open design and ethos of co-presence subject officers to constant exposure, both from incarcerated persons and colleagues:

> *In other prisons, yes, there I could 'retreat' to my office, but not here. Here, you stay on the unit. You just have to deal with it. And sometimes it can get really busy. And there are moments when it really gets to you, that busyness. Not just from the prisoners, also from your colleagues. It's pressure from both sides.*
>
> (Prison B, Interview PO^{BE} 4)

This experience of being continually "on display" reflects findings that officers in proximity-based settings are both observers and observed, with their emotional and physical comportment constantly under scrutiny. PO^{BE}s are not only relationally available but also under continual observation, a form of mutual visibility that reconfigures both privacy and power:

> PO^{BE}: *It also depends a lot on how quiet it is behind the desk compared to in front of it. Once a prisoner goes "sssshhh".*
>
> Researcher: *Then they're listening?*
>
> PO^{BE}: *Oooh yes, it's a cue that they're eavesdropping. And they hear everything, the prisoners. They hear everything, and they see everything too. So, you really don't have any moments of privacy. You're continuously being watched yourself.*
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Conversation, August 25, 2022)

The lack of physical barriers in Prison B, no glass partitions, no secure officer posts separating staff from incarcerated persons, supports the open regime's emphasis on accessibility, interaction, and relational presence. Yet this openness does not eliminate boundaries altogether, it simply displaces them. In the absence of spatial separation, boundaries are reconfigured as subtle, invisible lines. Officers and incarcerated persons share the same spaces, but not under equal conditions.

> The landing appears open and accessible at first glance. There are no physical barriers separating the incarcerated persons from the staff. The PO^{BE}'s desk is positioned slightly elevated, only a single step up from the main floor, facing the common space. Yet despite the apparent openness, a boundary is clearly in place, subtle, but understood. Along the edge of the step runs a strip of yellow-and-black tape, the kind often used to signal caution in industrial settings. It doesn't block movement, but it marks a line: a visual cue that delineates space and role. The message is clear, incarcerated persons are not step behind the tape.
>
> (Prison B, Fieldnotes, Observation, August 15, 2022)

This choreography seems ingrained, almost ritualistic. The tape stands in for something larger than itself, it signals an invisible architecture of control. In a setting where proximity is central and physical barriers are minimal, such subtle markers become essential tools for maintaining division. They draw lines without confrontation and reinforce role distinctions without the need for raised voices or locked doors.

6.2.2 Tensions and Strategies in Shared Spaces (PO^{NL} Prisons C& D)

In Dutch Prisons C and D, the accessibility and approachability of PO^{NL}s is not merely a consequence of their physical proximity to incarcerated individuals, but the outcome of a complex interplay between spatial design, team culture, their prison officer role, operational routines, and incarcerated persons strategies. Unlike their SO^{NL} counterparts, whose roles are characterized by spatial segregation and emotional detachment, PO^{NL}s carry out their duties within the open architecture of prison wings, where interaction is continuous and embedded in the rhythms of the daily regime. Yet such proximity is not inherently neutral; it is charged, negotiated, and, at times, contested. In both facilities, the team rooms (*teamkamers*) situated on the landings function as spatial nodes through which proximity, institutional order, and occupational culture are both enacted and reshaped. These spaces are more than information hubs: they operate as affective catalysts and meaning-producing agents that actively shape emotional climates and institutional practices. For both prisons, these spaces were embedded within the prison wings, "on the floor", and directly visible to the incarcerated persons. This spatial aspect of proximity results in an intensified relational dimension of proximity: PO^{NL}s report being constantly approachable in their own designated space with an increased sense of pressure:

> *Our door is always open. In professional terms, we call it 'always being on' when you're here. There's always a certain intensity. Because prisoners are constantly present, there's a continuous sense of being approachable.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 13)

From the perspective of carceral geography (Moran et al., 2016; Beijersbergen et al., 2014), the team room is therefore not a neutral space, but a performative force that contributes to the overall atmosphere on the prison wing (Turner et al. 2022). Staff often attributed a sort of "magnetism" to the staff room as a means to address it as both a hot-spot for interaction and circulates movement.

> *It's like the team room has a certain pull, for both detainees and for us. For us, it's where we handle most of the admin work, and the phone is there too. But more than that, it feels safe, and it's ours. Still, do all of us really need to be in there? The thing is, when no one's out on the floor, detainees head to the team room because it's the only place they actually see a staff member. I don't think they come because they want to be near the room itself, it's just that sometimes, there are no PO^{NL}s on the landing.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO^{NL} 13)

The "pull" of the team room is not simply the result of its accessibility, but of the absence of alternative PO^{NL} presence elsewhere. The room becomes a catch-all for questions, complaints, requests, not because it is meant to be, but because no other contact points are routinely staffed. For some officers, this has led to a subtle shift in how the space is experienced. Rather than serving as a deliberate buffer or strategic workspace, the team room feels increasingly like an improvised frontline, exposed, reactive, and saturated with demands. Another officer reflected on this duality in candid terms:

> The staff room here (Prison C) is basically wide open. And that's both a blessing and a bit of a curse. On the upside, it gives us PO^{NL}s some breathing space, an escape pod. But the downside? Detainees are continuously tugging at your sleeve here. It's become the go-to place for every little thing.
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 12)

PO^{NL}s critique colleagues who remain in the team room for extended periods, suggesting that such behaviour undermines both dynamic security and the implicit collegial expectations of initiative and visibility. As a PO^{NL} remarked:

> *The team room is kind of... well, it's not about escaping the work floor, but it can come across that way. For example, some colleagues head to the team room as early as 7:45 just to have coffee, and some stay there until 9 o'clock, basically avoiding interaction unless approached. Even though they know their responsibilities, there are always a few who tend to hold back a bit or who aren't really engaged in the work. Then others have to pick up the slack.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO^{NL} 5)

The team room becomes a symbolic and material arena where occupational norms are not only enacted, but also contested. The unwritten PO^{NL} code of initiative is negotiated here. In the eyes of some officers, absence from the landing is not merely a logistical matter but a breach of expectations. Such critique aligns with broader findings in prison studies where solidarity and mutual effort are central tenets (Kauffman, 1988; Tournel, 2015). For others it is viewed as a buffer zone that is both reassuringly safe and subtly insulating. This ambiguous perception of said space, mirrors occupational tensions in prison work, such as between solidarity and scrutiny, or care and control (Crewe, 2007; Sim, 2008). It is the spatial positioning of the team rooms in both prisons that shape staff perceptions of surveillance and control. As its layout restrict visual oversight of the landing:

> *From here (team room), I can actually see the two cells right across from me. There are moments... I do try to be out on the unit as much as possible. But there are times when we're all in the team room for a bit. And then, well, anything could really happen out on the floor. I mean, not necessarily chaos, but they (detained persons) could basically do what they want.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 18)

When staff withdraw into protected spaces, the choreographies of visibility shift, creating openings, real or perceived, for incarcerated persons. Proximity is no longer relational in those cases, rather, the team room becomes an anchor of incidental proximity, a magnet not through affective attachment, but through absence elsewhere. In this light, the room does not simply structure workflows, but actively reshapes the affective geographies of the prison itself (Turner & Peters, 2015; Moran et al., 2016). Underlying these spatial dynamics is a subtle, but potent, layer of moral judgment. Criticisms of colleagues who linger in the team room invoke discussion on effectiveness. Those who are “always out on the floor”, view themselves as embodying the moral centre of the occupational group. Conversely, retreating into the team room too easily becomes a signal of avoidance, disengagement, or even emotional erosion (Garrihy, 2021; Crawley, 2004a).

> *Yeah, some colleagues like to joke that I enjoy a bit of table tennis with the guys a little too much. And they're not wrong. But the thing is, when I'm out there playing, I'm right in the middle of the wing. I see stuff, I hear things. Way more than if I were just hanging around in the staff room.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO^{NL} 3)

Such remarks reflect the performative nature of relational proximity (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015), where even seemingly trivial acts like casual play can be reframed as forms of vigilance and spatial strategy. Staff must not only *be* available and alert, they must *appear* so.

Crucially, these dynamics are not uniformly experienced but vary by regime. In remand settings (HVB), for instance, the frequent in- and out-locking of incarcerated persons between activities creates more regulated interaction patterns and a clearer work rhythm. In long-term prison wings, by contrast, doors often remain open for extended periods, fostering a continuous approachability from incarcerated persons. As one officer explained:

> *In the HVB, you lock them up after every activity, that gives structure and peace. In the prison section, everything stays practically open. There are always detainees moving around.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO^{NL} 16)

Such regime differences are not only operational but relational: they shape how PO^{NL}s are positioned, perceived, and approached. Incarcerated persons, for their part, are acutely aware of these patterns and often navigate them strategically. Most notably when there is staff present that isn't a regular member of that team. PO^{NL}s reported how some prisoners evade in-locking by lingering in spaces like the kitchen or bathroom, or by initiating time-consuming requests just before transitions. These are not acts of open defiance, but calculated tests of the institutional margins, minor acts of delay that both probe and stretch the PO^{NL}'s capacity for response. In this way, proximity becomes a tactical field: officers must remain attuned not only to incarcerated persons' movements but to the affective cues, diversionary tactics, and informal rule negotiations embedded in routine interactions.

> *The real problem is, if it's not your regular unit than you don't really know them. You don't know who stays in which cell. And when you have to lock someone in, they'll start stalling or dragging things out. But you don't know the person, and that makes it*

> *tricky. So you kind of have to find a middle ground, figure out how to approach it, how to encourage them to go in.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO$^{\text{NL}}$ 8)

This middle ground opens up a zone between formal rules and informal negotiation. In such moments, proximity is not a stable condition but a challenge: the officer must address these tactics without the relational groundwork that routine familiarity provides. In this space of uncertainty, incarcerated persons are not passive subjects of control but active participants in shaping the encounter. They recognize staff turnover, spot inexperience, and exploit ambiguity, not through rebellion, but through subtle acts of delay, negotiation, and position-taking.

> PO$^{\text{NL}}$: *I don't need to win every little battle. But I do have to win the important ones. Because I want their respect, just as I give them respect. If you lose your authority, you've lost everything. If you let yourself be intimidated by those guys, it's over for you.*
>
> Interviewer: *You say, "I don't need to win everything." Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?*
>
> PO$^{\text{NL}}$: *They're rascals, of course. And they're cocky. And often still young. Sometimes they just want to feel like they're someone, not a nobody. And I can laugh at that sometimes. I think, yeah, fine, point made. But the important things, like I said: if they need to go to the workshops, then they're going to work. If we're going behind the door, then we're going behind the door. The big lines, the essential structure of the day, that's determined by me and my colleagues. And certainly not by the detainees.*
>
> (Prison D, Interview PO$^{\text{NL}}$ 6)

The enforcement of the red-green regime (see Chapter 4) further complicates the everyday policing of incarcerated persons. In theory, individuals with a "red" status are subject to stricter conditions, more frequent lock-ins and reduced autonomy, while those with "green" status are granted greater freedom of movement. However, this binary becomes difficult to sustain in practice, particularly when two incarcerated persons of differing status are housed in the same cell. As one PO$^{\text{NL}}$ officer explains, such pairings introduce logistical contradictions: to honour the green-status incarcerated person's rights, the cell door must remain open, thereby unintentionally extending the same liberties to the red-status occupant.

> *I find it tricky, especially when two guys are sharing a double cell. It's basically impossible to keep track. I mean, you'd have to sit right in front of their door. One is not allowed out, but the other is. So yeah… whoever came up with that system, I don't know. Look, if you pair two reds or two greens, no problem. But these guys, they're sharp. If one's not on red, the other one is. And if you've got a red and a green together, that door is always open. So, the red one ends up moving around freely too, because we're not constantly watching, like, 'wait, which one's supposed to be locked in?' You're not there to play cop all day.*
>
> (Prison C, Interview PO$^{\text{NL}}$ 11)

Accessibility is also mediated by who is present. Several officers described a marked contrast between working with trained PO^{NL}s and SO^{NL}s, who were sometimes brought in to cover staffing shortages. These role discrepancies disrupted team cohesion and operational flow. As one officer bluntly put it: *"Working with SO^{NL}s is a degradation of the profession. It's more dangerous, you don't know how they'll react."* (Prison D, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{NL}, June 8, 2023). Proximity, then, does not only concern officer-prisoner relations, but also hinges on collegial alignment: trust, familiarity, and role clarity among staff are prerequisites for managing relational exposure effectively.

This suggests that proximity is not merely a function of spatial design, but of institutional presence, or the lack thereof. Where are staff located? When are they visible? Who is available, and under what conditions? These questions shape the relational topography of the prison more deeply than the blueprint alone. In this light, proximity emerges not as a static attribute but as a dynamic resource, one that must be constantly negotiated across overlapping fields of expectation, surveillance, and demand.

In sum, what emerges from these Dutch prisons is a model of tactical proximity: a mode of interaction that is both facilitated and fraught by architectural openness, behavioural strategy, and institutional ambiguity. Officers are not merely present; they are constantly being approached, evaluated, and enlisted – by colleagues, incarcerated persons, and the rhythms of the institution itself. In such contexts, accessibility is not a fixed position, but a labour-intensive posture. It must be sustained, defended, and – at times – strategically withheld. Far from being an inherent good, proximity here reveals its frictions: how being reachable can also mean being overextended; how visibility enables recognition, but also invites manipulation; and how contact, when unregulated, may erode rather than strengthen the authority of the prison officer.

6.3 Conclusion: Proximity, Authority, and Relational Order

Across the prison ecologies examined in this chapter, proximity emerges not as a static condition of spatial nearness, but as a dynamic, negotiated, and deeply affective dimension of prison life. It shapes and is shaped by architecture, organizational routines, institutional philosophies, and the embodied strategies of both officers and incarcerated persons. Importantly, proximity does not function in uniform ways; its meanings and consequences vary substantially across regimes, roles, and relational configurations.

In Belgian Prison A, proximity was structurally undermined. Officers worked in physical isolation, trapped in a regime of visual and auditory disconnection, where digital technologies offered moments of psychological escape but simultaneously hollowed out the emotional core of relational engagement. Proximity here was spatially proximate yet relationally absent, what might be called *false proximity*. The PO^{BE} was always "on site," but rarely "in relation." By contrast, in Prison B, the open design and collaborative ethos transformed proximity into a cornerstone of institutional practice. Officers and incarcerated persons shared tasks, space, and even moments of informal exchange. Here, proximity did not erode boundaries but recalibrated them, allowing for the emergence of relational authority rooted in trust, mutual recognition, and the choreography of everyday co-presence.

For SO^{NL}s in Prisons C and D, proximity was intentionally excluded from the role. These officers were structurally and symbolically distanced from incarcerated persons, operating through screens, doors, and control panels. Separation was not just a design feature, it is a mode of governing. SO^{NL}s inhabited a form of *fixed distance*, one that fostered emotional detachment and procedural clarity but often rendered them opaque to the social rhythms of the prison. Their absence from the relational fabric of daily prison life created a parallel system, where prisoners and officers existed in the same institution but occupied distinct experiential worlds.

In stark contrast, PO^{NL} operated within a relationally dense environment. Their presence on the landings and in team rooms embedded them directly in the spatial and emotional flows of the prison. However, this accessibility came at a cost. The performative proximity required of PO^{NL}, being visibly present, approachable, and attuned, often led to saturation and blurred boundaries. The team room, while designed as a professional anchor, became a contested space: both a retreat and a frontline. It reflected broader tensions around visibility and initiative. Moreover, incarcerated persons in these settings often engaged in subtle, tactical navigation of proximity, testing the boundaries of interaction, exploiting staff unfamiliarity, and leveraging ambiguities in the red-green regime to momentarily invert the balance of authority.

What unites these settings is not a singular experience of proximity, but rather its multiplicity, its capacity to bind or estrange, to affirm or erode authority, to structure safety or expose vulnerability. Proximity is not merely a condition that officers exist within; they *work through* it, sustaining it, resisting it, reinterpreting it. Proximity, in this sense, is neither inherently empowering nor inherently corrosive. Its effects depend on how it is embedded in institutional design, mediated through technologies and routines, and enacted by staff under conditions of emotional and operational constraint.

Proximity of prison officers is not a spatial given but an institutional project. It is constructed, policed, and felt, shaped by design, regime, and role, and continuously negotiated in the everyday practices of prison life. In making proximity a central analytic, this chapter moves beyond dichotomies of care and control, or distance and closeness, to highlight the textures of carceral space as lived and relational. Proximity is not just about who is near or far, it is about how nearness is organized, how distance is maintained, and how relationships are sustained or fractured within the relational architectures of incarceration.

7 General Conclusions

This concluding chapter begins by revisiting the overarching research aims, design and comparative ethnographic approach that underpinned the study. It then synthesizes the core findings across the thematic axes related to the multidimensional concept of jail craft (i.e. occupational identity, emotional labour, dirty work, discretion, and proximity), in order to formulate answers to the research questions of the study. Following this, the chapter engages in critical methodological and theoretical reflection, considering the implications of studying prison work through an embedded, relational, and spatial lens. Finally, the chapter closes with a forward-looking agenda, identifying directions for future research that build on this study's insights and contribute to a deeper understanding of prison officer work in late-modern penal policy.

7.1 RESEARCH AIMS AND DESIGN

While prison officers have traditionally received limited scholarly attention in Belgium and the Netherlands, recent years have seen a gradual rise in ethnographic inquiry into their occupational dilemma's, cultures, and professional orientations (Liebling et al., 2021; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, 2023). This dissertation set out to follow in this line of work in an attempt to understand the prison not just as a place of confinement, but as a structured and structuring world of work. Where routines, relationships, power and proximity are negotiated daily by those responsible for upholding institutional order while navigating the complexities of human interaction in a setting defined by control. At the centre of this study are prison officers, not as faceless extensions of the carceral, but as practitioners of an 'accursed craft' (Pallot et al., 2010). The research followed them through corridors and break rooms, across courtyards and prison wings, surveillance rounds and informal conversations, not simply to record what they do and say, but to understand how they come to inhabit context-specific practices morally, relationally, spatially, emotionally, and organizationally.

But this study did not stop at the individual level. It explored how prison officers' practices are entangled with the structures around them – with managerial models, staffing regimes, prison architecture, and broader penal ideologies. In doing so, it shows that discretion is never exercised in a vacuum, that emotional labour is always situated, and that proximity –

whether desired or resisted – is never neutral. The prison officer's role is forged in this layered interplay of agency and constraint, in which personal judgement is filtered through organisational routines and institutional expectations.

By embedding this study in two national prison systems, Belgium and the Netherlands, the research reveals not only what prison work is, but also how it could be otherwise. Institutional context matters. Organisational design matters. Space matters. And most of all, the people who fill these roles matter, not just as subjects of policy, but as producers of practice. It is precisely the variation in daily practices that provided the primary rationale for adopting a comparative ethnographic research design. While partly informed by newly or soon to be implemented legal frameworks (i.e. Belgian Penitentiary Act of March 23rd, 2019 & the Dutch penal law Punish & Protect, 2021), this approach also responded to an international and methodological gap in penological research on prison officers (Nelken, 2010). Grounded in these contemporary needs and observations, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do structural, cultural, and legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape the construction of prison officers' occupational identities, and how are these perceived by prison officers?

2. How do institutional logics and structural conditions in Belgium and the Netherlands shape local prison officers' practices, and how are these embedded in their day-to-day work?

3. In what ways do spatial configurations in Belgian and Dutch prisons influence prison officers' interaction patterns and everyday work practices?

These questions were addressed by drawing upon 13 months of ethnographic observations in two Dutch and two Belgian prisons and 76 interviews with prison officer. Mechanisms operating within these institutions were observed, discussed with actors on the ground, and analysed with a sensitivity to the contingent nature of any explanation. Central to these analyses was the interplay between structural characteristics of the prison context (e.g., organisational hierarchies, formal role definitions), cultural features (e.g., institutional norms, occupational cultures), and the agency of those working within these settings. Special attention was given to how prison officers navigate official expectations, negotiate their roles in practice, and develop professional orientations in response to institutional constraints and cultural scripts.

7.2 Craft, Culture, and Context: Reconnecting Findings

7.2.1 Research Question One

The first research question aimed to uncover the structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms that shape how prison officers construct and reproduce their occupational identities. This question invited a layered analysis, attending both to how professional roles are shaped 'from above', through legal frameworks, institutional hierarchies, and organisational policies, and how they are enacted 'from below', in the lived practices, routines, and relational negotiations of officers themselves. The empirical findings related to this question were presented in chapters 4, and show how identity formation is not static or uniform, but context-dependent, mediated by national penal logics, local institutional cultures, and the everyday moral labour of prison work.

In Belgium, prison officers' identity has developed within an informal division of duties, shaped largely by whether they work in open or closed regimes. While custodial and relational responsibilities remain intertwined, the balance between them is uneven and depends heavily on local regime culture. This flexibility allows officers to adapt their role to context, but it also leaves room for inconsistencies in how authority and care are combined.

The Netherlands takes a far more prescriptive approach. By formally separating security-focused (SO^{NL}) and relationally-focused (PO^{NL}) roles, it institutionalises a division of prison work that not only organises tasks but symbolically defines the fundamental purpose of each role what counts as legitimate prison work. Such formal differentiation can create operational clarity, but it also risks entrenching occupational divides, narrowing the scope of officers' skills, and limiting the permeability between different ways of working.

The empirical work in Chapter 4 shows that institutional role design intersects with regime culture, shaping identity through the normative environment in which officers work. Penal positions in both countries are not culturally neutral: they operate as normative frameworks that imbue prison work with different meanings. Officers in *open or dynamic regimes* tend to develop relational orientations and discretionary practices. These environments enable a more morally expansive occupational identity, supported by tacit norms of trust, negotiation, and humanization.

In *closed regimes and security related post*, by contrast, officers tend to adopt procedural identities rooted in discipline, distance, and strict rule enforcement. These regimes generate a professional habitus based on vigilance and control, which is both learned and reproduced over time. Officers transferred across regime types experience identity dissonance, as the moral logic of their prior environment clashes with the expectations that come with their new role. This highlights the *institutional stickiness* of occupational socialization and the friction involved in adapting to divergent cultural logics.

Crucially, prison officer identity is not only shaped by role or regime but enacted and reproduced in practice. Officers develop their identities through what Bourdieu terms *practical mastery*: the capacity to navigate institutional ambiguities through situational judgment and embodied experience. In the Dutch system, PO^{NL}s view the position of SO^{NL}s as a logical starting point to acquiring a "feel for the game" by learning to interpret when and how to bend formal rules. This gradual access to discretionary authority becomes a central feature of professional legitimacy.

However, this process is unevenly distributed. For some officers, particularly those who value discretionary and relational engagement, being confined to procedural or peripheral roles in rigid units can lead to what might be described as craft deprivation, a lack of space for exercising moral agency or developing broader occupational skills. For others, however, such roles may be preferred, offering clear boundaries, reduced emotional demands, and a focus on well-defined security tasks. This variation underscores that the impact of role configuration is not uniform, but mediated by individual preferences, career ambitions, and local occupational cultures. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that prison officer working identities are not a coherent, top-down category but a relational, historically situated, and contested accomplishment (Peacock et al. 2017). Identity formation occurs at the intersection of structure (role and policy), culture (regime norms and institutional values), and practice (embodied labour and experience).

This interplay gives rise to multiple, sometimes conflicting, configurations of professional self-understanding. Some officers embody a rehabilitative ethos grounded in emotional intelligence and interpersonal skill; others perform a disciplinary role that emphasizes order and authority. These identities are not only reflective of individual disposition but are conditioned by access to recognition, discretion, and alignment with institutional legitimacy. In practice, opportunities to grow into a different role often depend on factors such as exposure to alternative regimes, informal mentoring from more experienced colleagues, or inclusion in team structures such as the MDO. For example, SO^{NL}s who are occasionally assigned to assist on the landings may gain insights and relational experience that prepare them for a PO^{NL} position, while PO^{BE}s in open regimes can develop negotiation skills that are less accessible in high-security units. Conversely, structural constraints such as staff shortages or rigid role boundaries can stall such transitions, and may leave officers embedded in a single operational for a prolonged duration.

In sum, the construction and reproduction of prison officer identities in Belgium and the Netherlands are shaped by a complex assemblage of structural legacies, formal role differentiation, regime cultures, and everyday practices. These identities are not monolithic but differentiated, hierarchical, and historically contingent. Officers move within, and are shaped by, a penal field that structures who they can become, how they are valued, and how their work is morally interpreted. Occupational identity in prison work is thus best understood not as a fixed institutional output, but as a situated, moral, and contested process of becoming.

7.2.2 Research Question Two

The second research question examined how institutional logics intersect with structural conditions, such as staffing levels, regime types, and task differentiation, to shape core dimensions of prison work. Rather than treating jail craft, discretion, and emotional labour as stable individual traits, this question approached them as situated practices that emerge in response to institutional environments. The analysis focused on identifying the mechanisms through which these structural and institutional dynamics produce distinct forms of officer conduct, and how these are experienced, negotiated, and embodied in the everyday realities of prison life.

Drawing on empirical material from prisons in Belgium and the Netherlands, the analysis reveals that these core dimensions of prison work are not simply expressions of individual competence but contextually situated practices – conditioned by the normative frameworks, spatial arrangements, and organizational dynamics of the prison. Officers' work is not enacted in isolation but emerges through the interaction between institutional scripts and embodied engagement. Three interconnected dynamics are key to understanding how this process unfolds: the enabling or constraining of jail craft, the stratification of discretion, and the prison ecologies through which emotional labour is sustained or suppressed.

Jail craft, understood as the practical know-how and tacit skill required to manage the moral and interpersonal complexities of prison life, is not evenly distributed across the prison field. Its development depends on the presence of institutional logics that encourage relational work and discretion.

Settings characterized by relational proximity to both peers and incarcerated individuals allows for the cultivation of craft knowledge through informal interaction, continuity of presence, and peer learning. Settings where work is fragmented, underregulated, or dominated by security imperatives, officers are structurally denied opportunities to acquire such craft. The introduction of the IMD regime in Dutch Prison C, for instance, decouples SO^{NL}s from their previous role in overseeing movement and decision-making, rendering them functionally redundant and craft-inhibited-a structurally induced condition in which officers are denied access to the spatial, relational, and procedural environments that allow jail craft to emerge and consolidate. Belgian PO^{BE}s in isolated posts experience similar constraints. Officers in these environments develop a sense of detachment from the moral substance of their work and an inability to "learn the job" in any meaningful way.

This inhibition of jail craft has direct implications for officers' emotional labour. The effort to manage one's emotions in line with occupational expectations is not undertaken in isolation, but is deeply embedded in the affective dimension of the prison: the ensemble of spatial design, collegial dynamics, regime culture, and workload rhythms that together shape how emotions are expressed, absorbed, or suppressed. In relationally supportive environments officers benefit from shared informal rituals, peer validation, and moments of decompression, which collectively sustain emotional regulation. However, in fragmented or under-resourced settings, emotional labour becomes unanchored: officers often report emotional exhaustion, numbness, or moral estrangement. Thus, the loss or absence of craft is not only a cognitive or professional issue, it is also affective, shaping how officers feel in and about their work.

Across all sites, officers' practices are not only cognitively understood but embodied: lived through sensory perception, affective resonance, and physical comportment. Institutional conditions are not abstract backdrops but are felt in the body.

For instance, officers working in harsh sensory environments (e.g., poor lighting, rigid routines) described themselves as physically and emotionally worn down. In contrast, officers in lighter, more mobile regimes articulated a sense of vitality and personhood. The body thus becomes the medium through which structure is internalized.

Jail craft and it's dimensions are not merely personal attributes or stable skillsets; they are contextually mediated practices shaped by the interplay of institutional logics, structural conditions, and embodied experience. Institutional differentiation – by regime type, staffing model, or role architecture – produces *uneven geographies of professional possibility*.

7.2.3 Research Question Three

The third research question centred on the spatial-relational dynamics of prison work, with particular attention to how the physical and architectural configuration of the prison environment shapes officers' professional orientations and relational practices. Using the concept of proximity as a guiding lens – understood in its spatial, affective, and institutional dimensions – this question explored how carceral space mediates the possibilities for meaningful engagement between staff and with incarcerated individuals. It examined the mechanisms through which design, routine, and policy influence not only patterns of interaction, but also officers' sense of role, presence, and distance.

This study set out to explore how different spatial structures shape prison officers' professional orientations and relational practices. Building on the conceptualisation of *proximity* as both a spatial and affective phenomenon (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015), the analysis has shown that the architectural and organizational design of prison environments profoundly conditions not only how officers interact, but also how they experience their own roles, identities, and capacities for agency.

The data reveals that spatial proximity is not a neutral or incidental factor; it is a *structuring mechanism* that enables or constrains professional practice. Physical layouts, circulation patterns, and unit design act as mediators of relational possibility. In *open and relationally dense environments*, proximity becomes a resource, an enabling condition for the performance of jail craft, the development of discretionary competence, and the enactment of emotional labour. Officers in these contexts describe a sense of *being present* rather than merely performing oversight. Proximity allows them to read situations fluidly, intervene early, and build trust. Practices that align with contemporary penal discourses of dynamic security and rehabilitation.

By contrast, spatially fragmented environments – characterized by architectural disconnection, digitized communication or seclusion – reconfigure proximity into surveillance, distance, or redundancy. In such settings, proximity exists in form but not in function. Officers describe working in "islands" or "glass boxes," where relational contact is minimized or rendered instrumental. These environments foster professional detachment and emotional withdrawal, eroding the conditions in which meaningful engagement can take place. Here, space becomes a vector of alienation, reinforcing occupational identities rooted in procedure, containment, and affective suppression.

Importantly, the findings challenge simplistic binaries between "open" and "closed" regimes or between relational and security-oriented work. The concept of *tactical proximity* captures the ambivalence experienced by officers in saturated relational spaces. In environments where prison officers are embedded in living units and constantly accessible, proximity can be both empowering and burdensome. Officers reported feeling permanently exposed – subject to constant demands from incarcerated persons and surveillance from colleagues – with little time for retreat or emotional recalibration. This underscores that proximity is not inherently positive; it must be *managed*, *structured*, and *supported* to become professionally sustainable.

From a broader theoretical perspective, these findings demonstrate how carceral space is not simply inhabited, it is performed. Spatial configurations shape not only what is possible in terms of practice, but what is thinkable and legitimate in terms of role. Officers internalize spatial regimes as part of their occupational habitus, developing expectations about when to engage, how to present authority, and what forms of emotional expression are institutionally sanctioned. Proximity, in this view, is not a technical feature of design but a moral infrastructure: it determines who is seen, who is heard, and who is allowed to care.

In sum, proximity in prison is a socially and institutionally mediated phenomenon. It is conditioned by the interplay of architecture, policy, and routine; it is enacted through practice; and it is experienced through the body. Whether enabling or constraining, proximity shapes the *relational grammar* of prison work.

7.3 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offers a substantial contribution to the theoretical understanding of prison officer work by empirically unpacking how occupational identities and practices are not merely imposed by institutional structures, but *co-constructed through lived experience, spatial environments, and moral negotiations*. Building on and extending existing literature on jail craft, discretion, and emotional labour three key theoretical additions emerge from this research.

7.3.1 From Craft to Craft Access: Reframing Skill as a Structurally Mediated Possibility

While existing literature often idealizes *jail craft* as a tacit and experiential skillset developed through time and interaction (Crewe et al., 2015; Peacock et al., 2017, Garrihy, 2020; 2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024), this study nuances that understanding by introducing the concept of *craft access*. Not all officers are positioned equally to acquire or perform craft. Role stratification, spatial isolation, and institutional policy produce what we term *craft inhibition* – a condition wherein officers are denied the relational and situational exposures necessary to develop a "feel for the game" in relation to incarcerated persons (Bourdieu, 1990). This reframing shifts the analytical focus from craft as an individual accomplishment to craft as a structurally mediated opportunity. In the broader context of post-authoritarian prisons, such inhibition is not inherently dysfunctional. For roles designed around surveillance, rule enforcement, or security-first mandates, minimising discretion may align with institutional priorities. The implications are therefore uneven: for officers whose legitimacy rests on interpersonal engagement and interpretive skill, the loss of craft undermines their professional identity and weakens their capacity to manage complex interactions; for those in security-centric posts, craft inhibition may simply reinforce the role's intended detachment. The question is not whether craft should be universally accessible, but whether its absence in certain roles inadvertently erodes adaptive capacity or deepens occupational silos to the point of undermining institutional coherence.

7.3.2 Proximity as an institutional condition

Second, the study advances the conceptualisation of proximity beyond a mere spatial or operational concern, proposing it as an institutional condition that structures both the moral and organisational dimensions of prison work. In line with Jefferson and Gaborit (2015), proximity operates simultaneously across *physical, affective,* and *symbolic* registers. It is not simply about distance or visibility, but about the quality and meaning of nearness.

The findings suggest that proximity does more than enable relational contact – it mediates the very conditions under which care, discretion, and legitimacy can be meaningfully enacted. Officers' ability to build trust, interpret rules contextually, and manage tension depends on how the institution organises physical layout, movement, and communicative flow. Proximity, in this sense, regulates who can be seen, who can be heard, and who can be known within the carceral setting.

Different institutional configurations in Belgium and the Netherlands illustrate how proximity is cultivated or curtailed. Proximity can be tactical and dialogical – a form of managed nearness that enables relational presence without collapsing professional distance. Officers rely on visibility and everyday contact to sustain moral authority, while spatial openness supports informal dialogue and situational discretion. By contrast, proximity can also reactive and procedural, mediated through monitoring rather than conversation. Physical barriers, rigid movement patterns, and chronic understaffing limit officers' capacity to maintain consistent, humane engagement.

The study also identifies the emergence of what might be termed "tactical proximity" or even "proximity without presence." In some environments prison officers are expected to be available without being relationally present. Some environments create the illusion of accessibility while undermining the depth of contact. Understanding proximity as an institutional condition therefore challenges traditional distinctions between "security" and "care." It reveals how spatial design, staffing structures, and organisational culture together define the possibilities of penal work. When proximity is reduced to visibility or monitoring, it risks producing emotional detachment and moral fatigue. When it is supported through trust, time, and team stability, it become a resource for discretion.

Ultimately, proximity is not merely a logistical arrangement but a relational economy through which institutions govern. Whether it sustains or erodes jail craft depends on how the prison's architecture, routines, and moral climate configure the boundaries between presence and distance, control and care, visibility and understanding.

7.3.3 Institutional Stickiness

Prison officers do not simply learn a role; they absorb a regime – its spatial rhythms, moral tone, normative expectations, and relational styles – through embodied practice. Over time, these experiences sediment into a durable practical sense of what it means to act legitimately and professionally within a given institutional order. This embodied knowledge, once established, is both affectively and cognitively resilient. Officers learn to feel the institution as much as they think it, developing a kind of tacit attunement to its tempo, hierarchies, and moral cues.

When officers are transferred or when regimes are restructured, this embodied alignment is unsettled. Officers do not merely adapt to a new environment; they must unlearn and renegotiate their ingrained sense of what counts as appropriate action, emotional expression, and authority. The friction that emerges in these transitions, exposes the difficulty of recalibrating one's professional self when institutional expectations shift but embodied dispositions remain.

The comparative findings illustrate this clearly. In the Netherlands, officers moving SO^{NL}s to PO^{NL}s often struggle to reconcile a newly expected relational style with long-internalised habits of procedural vigilance. Similarly, in Belgium, transferring from prison A to prison B, officers describe the confusion of shifting between institutions with contrasting expectations. These transitions rarely produce immediate behavioural change. Instead, officers oscillate between inherited and emerging repertoires of practice, revealing how institutional learning resists formal reform.

The concept of stickiness foregrounds the temporal and affective inertia of socialisation, offering a textured account of why institutional change rarely translates smoothly into frontline transformation. Organisational reforms such as functional differentiation assume that new norms can be trained or legislated into being. Yet, as this study demonstrates, institutional dispositions are slow-moving sediments of practice.

Stickiness also has an emotional dimension. Officers' attachments to certain ways of working – particularly those tied to safety, camaraderie, and certainty – make them reluctant to embrace reforms that threaten these anchors. Even when they intellectually endorse change, affective loyalty to familiar routines and shared understandings of "good work" can sustain resistance. Institutional inertia is therefore not only bureaucratic but embodied: it resides in the sensorium, in the gestures, language, and moods that define professional belonging.

7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

This study has shown that the everyday realities of prison officer work in Belgium and the Netherlands are deeply shaped by institutional structures, cultural expectations, and spatial design. While the analysis has illuminated how the various roles operate across each contexts, it also exposes the contradictions that underpin contemporary penal reform. Policies invoking "efficiency," may erode the very conditions that make professionalism possible, such as single staffed units or the use of security officers on prison landings. This concluding section outlines a forward-looking but critical agenda that integrates comparative lessons, policy implications, and directions for future research, while situating these within broader theoretical debates.

7.4.1 Comparative Lessons: Cohesion and Differentiation

Lessons can be learned from emphasis on team-based organisation within prison officer roles. In the Netherlands, despite growing managerial and administrative pressures, collaboration within fixed units is the norm and is regarded as essential to the functioning of Dutch prison officers in operating the daily program (Gravesteijn et al., 2018; Kommer, 1991). Officers tend to define themselves through their capacity to operate as part of a coherent and interdependent team. In Belgium, rotational scheduling and frequent transfers between prison units disrupt the formation of stable teams and erode everyday collaboration. Officers often describe being individually responsible for their assigned duties, operating in isolation and without consistent peer support or time for joint reflection. Shift work, instead of being organised around stable teams, makes cooperation contingent rather than habitual. Prison A represents the most pronounced manifestation of this pattern – where the collective "we" has given way to a "me versus them" dynamic, and collegial solidarity has been replaced by solitude and self-reliance. Even in less polarised settings, this reliance on individual coping undermines the informal networks through which jail craft is typically learned and transmitted (Peacock et al., 2017; Garrihy, 2021).

A second lesson concerns the divisions that functional differentiation introduces. Differentiation embeds divergent institutional logics – one oriented toward security and control, the other toward care and functional relationships. These logics, each legitimate in its own right, can come into tension when they intersect in the same unit, producing subtle forms of friction or misunderstanding. The risk involves creating prison officer groups that are neither fully divided nor genuinely integrated, caught between two paradigms of prison work and uncertain about their collective purpose.

7.4.2 Future Research

Looking ahead, several avenues for research emerge. First, the ongoing implementation of functional differentiation in Belgian prisons warrants studies in the specific institutions where the reform is being applied. As the policy is still being rolled out, its implications for professional identity, collaboration, and team cohesion remain uncertain at the time of writing. This creates an opportunity for comparative and ethnographic inquiry, between Belgian prisons. For the Netherlands, more academic attention should be paid to security officers – a group that is largely overlooked in penal scholarship compared to Dutch PO's/PIW'ers. Closer attention to their experiences could shed light on how their role in other Dutch prisons is enacted in practice.

Second, future work should broaden the analytical lens to include trade unions as active agents in the governance of prison work. Their influence on working conditions, recognition, and policy implementation is substantial. Understanding how unions shape, mediate, or resist reforms would enrich our grasp of the politics of prison professionalism in Belgium.

Third, there is scope for more spatially sensitive ethnography in both Belgium and the Netherlands. Jail craft already implies a spatial logic – officers navigate bounded environments that structure movement, contact, and discretion. Research should further unpack how architectural design, layout, and spatial management shape the relational possibilities of the job in other prisons in both countries.

Overall, future scholarship on prison work should be conceptualised as a relational, institutional, and spatial project: one that examines how professional roles, organisational reforms, and physical environments continuously co-produce one another.

7.4.3 Reflection on the here and now

Theoretically, this study positions jail craft as a diagnostic of contemporary penal governance. It shows that the very capacities sustaining humane imprisonment – discretion, empathy or a present-orientation – are precisely those most undermined by managerial and technocratic reforms. The concept of jail craft exposes how these aspects are structurally constrained. Jail craft is a situated capacity – it emerges and endures only within environments that allow officers to exercise judgment, cultivate trust, and engage relationally with incarcerated persons. In this sense, the quality of jail craft is inseparable from the institution in which it is practiced.

In the Dutch context, traces of the present-orientation remain clearly observable in the everyday practice of prison officers. Professional identity continues to be shaped by ideals of proximity, presence, and constructive dialogue with prisoners – values that long distinguished the Dutch prison system. Yet the capacity for this orientation to flourish has become increasingly constrained by the restrictiveness of the institutional environment. The daily programme itself makes this tension particularly visible. PO^{NL}s work continues to be culturally grounded in a fundamentally here-and-now orientation: responding to immediate incidents, de-escalating tensions before they crystallise into conflict, and maintaining the relational fabric that allows everyday life on the unit to function. This present-focused mode of working remains at the core of Dutch officers' professional identity and the lens through which they make sense of their tasks.

Yet this orientation has been operating within a temporal framework that is structured by the six-week promotion-demotion cycle for about a decade. Although PO^{NL}s continue to focus on what is happening in the immediacy – who needs attention, which situations are volatile, which routines require adjustment – the institutional timetable obliges them to anticipate upcoming behavioural assessments. Time is therefore bifurcated between the immediate custodial and relational demands that require constant negotiation, and the evaluative labour that feeds into longer-term decisions about autonomy, restrictions, and privileges.

This dual temporality becomes especially clear in the daily routines of the locking incarcerated persons in and out. PO^{NL}s must deal with incarcerated persons on their unit that can be either on the green or red regime, who must remain behind closed doors due to "red" status, and how to deal with doubled cells where incarcerated persons under different regimes share a confined space. Similarly, structuring the smooth functioning of the daily programme requires officers to invest energy in the logistics of safe movement and unit stability – tasks defined by immediacy – while also documenting attendance and behaviour for future evaluation.

In this way, the classificatory and administrative demands of the reward system do not displace the here-and-now orientation of officers; instead, they layer a future-oriented evaluative logic on top of it. Officers remain present-oriented in how they interpret, prioritise, and act, even as their actions are increasingly pulled into a broader temporal architecture that they must account for. At the same time, the system's long-term perspective does not fundamentally alter the present-focused orientation that characterises officer practice. The immediate functioning of the wing consistently takes precedence over the promotion-demotion system. The operational demands of the day – maintaining order, ensuring safe movement, resolving conflicts, and sustaining a workable unit climate – regularly outweigh the anticipatory logic of behavioural evaluation. This prioritisation is also visible in the steadily reduced presence of PO^{NL}s during MDO meetings. For the two studies Dutch prisons, their presence during the actual meeting had either been reduced to only one PO^{NL} or had been eliminated altogether. This appears to reveal a clear hierarchy of commitments in which the here-and-now imperatives of custodial life override the future-oriented ambitions of the reward system, to a degree.

More than the promotion-demotion mechanism itself, it is the level of restrictions within the institution, the security category, and the specific safety challenges of the unit that determine the extent to which officers can, or must, work in a present-oriented way. The presence of ESRD-designated incarcerated persons in prison D for instance, who require close monitoring and frequent interventions, imposes significant operational and spatial restrictions on daily life within the units. Similarly, the persistent problem of contraband, including the regular over-throwing of drugs and other prohibited items, compelled management to respond through intensified search operations and routine lockdowns. These measures, while aimed at restoring order, reinforce a security-driven rhythm that disrupts the continuity and relational depth of officers' work. As a result, the Dutch orientation in the 'here and now' endures in discourse, even within a future oriented governance model, but appears to be more difficult to uphold within local security restrictions. What remains in those instances is a relational engagement that operates under conditions that make such engagement increasingly precarious. For both scholars and policymakers, the task ahead is to maintain this relational practice rooted in stable teams, reflective spaces, and humane spatial design. Only by restoring the infrastructures that enable officers to act and reflect can they maintain their 'here and now' craft as a living form of work.

7.5 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

Looking back, this study adopted a qualitative, comparative design that combined ethnographic sensibilities with semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This approach enabled a close examination of how prison officers in two Belgian and two Dutch prisons construct, negotiate, and enact their work under differing institutional and spatial conditions. Working across two national contexts created both analytical depth and practical complexity: access procedures, research ethics, and field relations differed substantially between sites, requiring constant methodological reflexivity.

A key strength of this design lies in its capacity to capture the contextual specificity of jail craft. The comparative lens allowed the study to trace how occupational roles are experienced depending on organisational culture, staffing structures, and spatial design. At the same time, the interpretive and inductive nature of the research demanded awareness of my own positionality. The scope of the research naturally positioned me closer to staff than to incarcerated persons. This institutional vantage point shaped the focus of the research: it centres on staff culture, not on incarcerated persons' lived experiences. I recognise that as an institutional blind spot, but also as a deliberate methodological focus. By looking closely at the world of officers, I was able to trace how structural reforms and spatial regimes are translated into daily routines and occupational meanings.

A second form of reflexivity concerns what I would describe as a temporal or moral blind spot – the risk of normalisation. Over time, each setting would begin to feel routine to the researcher. This was countered through fieldnotes, supervision, and by revisiting early observations to re-examine what had become familiar. The gradual desensitisation observed in the field reveals how the prison itself produces adaptation – how both officers and researchers are shaped by the same institutional forces of emotional regulation and distancing. Acknowledging these aspects is a part of the analytical insight: what is hard to see often points to the generative structures that govern institutional life.

For future researchers, several lessons can be drawn. Comparative prison ethnography benefits from sustained presence and trust-building but also requires flexibility – an ability to adapt to institutional rhythms and the moral demands of fieldwork. Longitudinal and multi-sited designs could further illuminate how reforms unfold over time, especially those reshaping occupational boundaries or carceral space.

Despite its contributions, this study has its limitations. It paid less attention to intra-group variations among officers in the dissertation, that could further nuance how jail craft is expressed. Differences between junior and senior staff, variations across contracted versus permanently appointed officers, gendered approaches to conflict management, and distinctions between officers working in specialised units (such as remand, long-stay, or drug-free wings) may all shape how skills are enacted on the ground. The focus on staff perspectives also leaves the incarcerated persons viewpoint only indirectly represented. Finally, the fieldwork was conducted within a specific temporal window, meaning that the results from these institutions are subject to change depending on the developments that may occur within each context. Shifts in staffing levels, the introduction of new security technologies, changes in management teams, alterations to the organisational model (such as the expansion of differentiated staff roles), or new policy directives – ranging from prison population-reduction strategies to revised regimes or strike-related protocols – could all significantly reshape daily practices and staff-prisoner interactions. Consequently, the findings presented here should be read as grounded in the institutional realities of the period in which the fieldwork was carried out, rather than as static characteristics of the prisons themselves. These limitations do not undermine the findings; rather, they clarify their scope and epistemic positioning. The analysis offers a grounded but situated account of prison officer culture, one that reflects both the possibilities and constraints of researching in closed institutions.

References

Algemene Rekenkamer (2019), *Resultaten verantwoordingsonderzoek 2018, ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (VI). Rapport bij het jaarverslag*, Den Haag. Algemene Rekenkamer.

Allard, T., Wortley, R., & Stewart, A. (2006). The Purposes of CCTV in Prison. *Security Journal* 1-25.

Alvesson, M., Ashcroft, K.L., Thomas, R. (2008) Identity Matters. Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies. *Organization*, 15(1): pp.5-28.

Aranda-Hughes V & Mears DP (2023) Solitary Confinement and Prison Personnel: Emotional numbing as a response to work in extended restrictive housing. *Incarceration*: pp.1-19.

Arnold, H. (2005) 'The effects of prison work', in A. Liebling and S. Maruna (Eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Arnold, H., Liebling, A. & Tait, S. (2007) Prison officers and prison culture, pp. 471-495, In: Jewkes, Y (Eds.) *Handbook on prisons.* UK: Willan.

Ashforth, B.E. & Humphrey, R.H. (1993) Emotional Labor in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity. *Academy Of Management Review,* Vol. 18, 88-115.

Ashforth, B.E. and Kreiner, G.E., 1999. 'How Can You Do It?': Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity. *The Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), p.413.

Ashforth, B.E., Kreiner, G.E, Clark, M.A. & Fugate, M., (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), pp.149-174.

Ashforth, B.E. and Kreiner, G.E. (2014) Contextualizing dirty work: The neglected role of cultural, historical and demographic context. *Management and Organization Review, 20*(4): 81-108.

Atkinson, P. A. & Coffey, A. (1997). Analysing documentary realities. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*, London: Sage, 45-62.

Attrill, G., & Liell, G. (2007). Offenders' views on risk assessment. In N. Padfield (Eds.), *Who to release? Parole, fairness and criminal justice*. Cullompton, UK: Willan: pp. 191-201.

Aytac, S. (2015) Loneliness as Mediator between Job Satisfaction and Intention to Leave: A Study on Prison Staff in Turkey. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review:* 1-4.

Bayeck, R. Y. (2022). Positionality: The Interplay of Space, Context and Identity. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*.

Bhaskar, R. (1998). Philosophy and scientific realism. In M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson, & A. Norrie (Eds.), Critical realism: Essential readings (pp. 16-47). London: Routledge.

Bhaskar, R. (2014). *The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences*. Routledge.

Beckett, K. (2016). The uses and abuses of police discretion: Toward harm reduction policing. *Harvard Law & Policy Review, 10*(1), 77-100.

Beijersbergen, K. A., Dirkzwager, A. J. E., van der Laan, P. H., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2014). A Social Building? Prison Architecture and Staff-Prisoner Relationships. *Crime & Delinquency*, 1-32.

Beijersbergen KA, Dirkzwager AJ, van der Laan PH, et al. (2016) A social building? Prison architecture and staff-prisoner relationships. *Crime & Delinquency 62*(7): 843-874.

Bell, K. (2014). Resisting commensurability: Against informed consent as an anthropological virtue. *American Anthropologist*, 116(3), 511-522.

Bennett, J., Crewe, B., & Wahidin, A. (2008). *Understanding Prison Staff*. Willan.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Anchor Books.

Beyens, K. (2019) Zal de tanker van het gevangeniswezen kunnen gekeerd worden? *Panopticon*: pp.1-11

Beyens K, Boone M (2013) *'Zeg maar Henk tegen de chef': Ervaringen met het Belgische detentie regime in PI Tilburg.* Den Haag: Boom Lemma.

Beyens, K., Breuls, L., Humblet, D., Robberechts, J., Snacken, S., & Vanhouche, A.-S. (2021). De penitentiair beambte van de toekomst. Het belang van dynamische veiligheid. Fatik, 38(170), 5-17.

Beyens, K., Devresse, M.-S., & Gilbert, E. (2011). *Werken en leven in de gevangenis: De gebruikers aan het woord. Verslag van rondetafelgesprekken over de architecturale noden van de nieuwe gevangenissen*. Koning Boudewijnstichting.

Beyens, K., Dirkzwager, A. & Korf, D., (2014) "Detentie en gevolgen van detentie. Onderzoek in Nederland en België", *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie:* 3-30.

Beyens, K., & Geerts, I. (2024). Digitalisering van het gevangenisleven. Een etnografisch onderzoek naar de impact van het digitale platform PrisonCloud. *Panopticon, 45*(5), 443-463.

Beyens, K., Gilbert, E., & Devresse, M.-S. (2012). Architecturale behoeften van gevangenisbewoners en -gebruikers. Fatik, 133, 5-16.

Beyens, K., Kennes, P., Snacken, S., & Tournel, H. (2015). The craft of doing qualitative research in prison. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, *4*(1), 66-78.

Beyens, K., Snacken, S. & Eliaerts, C. (1993) *Barstende muren. Overbevolkte gevangenissen : omvang, oorzaken en mogelijke oplossingen*. Kluwer, Gouda Quint : Antwerpen, Arnhem.

Beyens, K. & Tubex, H. (2002), "Gedetineerden geteld", In S. Snacken (red.). *Strafrechtelijk beleid in beweging*, Brussel: VUBPress: 139-177.

Biggam, F. H., & Power, K. G. (1997). Social Support and Psychological Distress in a Group of Incarcerated Young Offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *41*(3), 213-230.

Blaustein, J. (2014). Reflexivity and Participatory Policy Ethnography: Situating the Self in a Transnational Criminology of Harm Production. In: Lumsden, K., Winter, A. (Eds.) *Reflexivity in Criminological Research.* Palgrave Macmillan, London. 301-312.

Blokland, L.J. (1974) *Werken achter tralies: een onderzoek naar de positie van bewaarders in 33 Nederlandse strafinrichtingen*. Arendonk, Albora.

Blumer, H. (1969). Symbolic interactionism. Perspective and method. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Boone, M. (2012). Schurende mensbeelden: Het verantwoordelijk stellen van gedetineerden voor hun resocialisatie. In F. de Jong, & R. S. B. Kool (editors), *Relaties van gezag en verantwoordelijkheid: strafrechtelijke ontwikkelingen* (blz. 291-306). Boom Lemma.

Boone, M. (2021) "Van zelfdwang naar zachte macht. Civilisatie slokt emancipatie op", *Justitiële verkenningen, 47*(2), 40-57.

Boone, M. & Moerings, M., (2008) "Detentiecapaciteit en detentieomstandigheden in Nederland", *FATIK: Tijdschrift voor Strafbeleid en Gevangeniswezen: pp.* 5-10.

Boone, M., Pakes, F., & van Wingerden, S. (2020). Explaining the collapse of the prison population in the Netherlands: Testing the theories. *European Journal of Criminology*, *19*(4), 488-505.

Bosworth M (2005) *Encyclopedia of prisons and correctional facilities* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bourdieu P (1980) The Logic of Practice. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., (1990). *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford University Press.

Bowen GA (2009), "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method". *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 2 pp. 27-40

Breuls, L. (2016) De implementatie van dynamische veiligheid in de penitentiaire praktijk: reflecties op basis van vergelijkend etnografisch onderzoek in vreemdelingendetentie. *Fatik, 37*(168), 6-17.

Brewer, J.D. (2000) *Ethnography*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brodsky, C.M. (1982) 'Work Stress in Correctional Institutions'. *Journal of Prison Jail Health*, 74-102.

Brown, A., Fleetwood, S., & Roberts, J. M. (2002). *Critical realism and Marxism*. Routledge.

Bruhn, A., Nylander, P-A. & Lindberg, O. (2010) The Prison Officer's Dilemma: Professional Representations Among Swedish Prison Officers. *Les Dossiers des Sciences de l'Education*: pp.77-93.

Bruhn, A Nylander, P-A & Johnsen, B (2016): From prison guards to… what? Occupational development of prison officers in Sweden and Norway. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*: pp.1-16.

Cacioppo JT, Hawkley LC. (2009) Perceived social isolation and cognition. *Trends Cogn Sci. 13*(10):447-54

Carey, T., 2000. Mountjoy: The Story of a Prison. Wilton, Cork Ireland: Collins Press.

Carlson, J. R., & Thomas, G. (2006). Burnout Among Prison Caseworkers and Corrections Officers. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *43*(3), 19-34.

Castle, T.L. (2008) Satisfied in the Jail? Exploring the Predictors of Job Satisfaction Among Jail Officers. *Criminal Justice Review*: pp.48-63.

Chauvenet, A., Orlic, F., & Benguigui, G. (1994). *Le Monde des surveillants de prison*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Chenault, S & Collins, B (2019) It's dirty work but someone has to do it: An examination of correctional officer taint management techniques. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology*: pp.37-56.

Commissie Van den Oever. (1981). *Rapport van de werkgroep 'Onderzoek Bewaardersfunctie'.* 's-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Justitie/DGW.

Compton, C A & Brandhorst, J (2021) Prison is power: Federal correctional officers, gender and identity work. *Gender, Work & Organization*: pp.1-17

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Coyle, A. (2005). *Understanding prisons: key issues in policy and practice*. Open University Press.

Crawley, E. (2004a) *Doing prison work: The public and private lives of prison officers.* Portland, OR: Willan.

Crawley, E. M. (2004b). Emotion and performance: Prison officers and the presentation of self in prisons. *Punishment and Society, 6*, 411-427.

Crawley E & Crawley P (2008) Understanding prison officers: Culture, cohesion and conflict. In Bennett J, Crewe B, Wahidin A (eds) *Understanding prison staff*. Willan, pp. 134-152.

Crewe, B. (2007). The sociology of imprisonment. In Y. Jewkes (Ed.), *Handbook on Prisons* (pp.123-151). Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Crewe, B. (2009). *The prisoner society: Power, adaptation, and social life in an English prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crewe, B. (2011). Soft power in prison: Implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy. European Journal of Criminology, 8, 455-468.

Crewe, B. (2014). Not looking hard enough: Masculinity, emotion, and prison research. Qualitative Inquiry, 20(4), 392-403.

Crewe, B. and Liebling, A. (2018), 'Quality, Professionalism and the Distribution of Power in Public and Private Sector Prisons' in A. Hucklesby and S. Lister, eds., *The Private Sector and Criminal Justice*, Palgrave: pp. 161-94.

Crewe, B. Liebling, A. & Hulley, S. (2011) Staff Culture, use of authority and prisoner quality of life in public and private sector prisons. *Journal of Criminology*: pp.94-115.

Crewe, B. Liebling, A. & Hulley, S. (2015) Staff-Prisoner Relationships, Staff Professionalism, and the Use of Authority in Public- and Private-Sector Prisons. *Law & Social Inquiry*: pp.309-344.

Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P. and Smith, A., (2014). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 56-74.

Czarniawska B (2007) Shadowing: And Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies. *Copenhagen Business School Press*.

Daems, T. (2020a) Het klachtenrecht voor gedetineerden trad in werking: wat nu?, *Panopticon*: pp.505-515.

Daems, T. (2020b) "Geen weg terug: nieuwe wet hervormt organisatie en personeelsstatuut Belgische gevangeniswezen", *Sancties: Tijdschrift over Straffen en Maatregelen*, 14-22.

Danermark, B., Ekström, M., Jakobsen, L., & Karlsson, J. C. (2002). *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. Routledge.

De Boer, H van Wingerden, S & Boone, M (2024) De invloed van opsporings- en vervolgingsbeleid op de Nederlandse gevangenispopulatietrend: Een diepgaande analyse van de omvang van de gevangenispopulatie tussen 2000 en 2020. *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie*

de Jonge, G. (2007) "De koers van het Nederlandse gevangeniswezen sinds de Tweede Wereldoorlog", *Justitiële Verkenningen*, 31-43.

de Groot, T. (2019) *Straffen en belonen in de gevangenis. Promoveren en degraderen in het licht van het resocialisatiebeginsel,* Weert: Celcus.

De Keyser, C & Vanhouche A-S (2019) Een exploratief onderzoek naar de ervaringen van gedetineerden en personeel in het Penitentiair Landbouwcentrum Ruiselede. *Fatik*: pp.20-31.

Den Bak, R., Popma, A., Nauta-Jansen, L., Nieuwbeerta, P. & Jansen, M. (2018) *Psychosociale criminogene factoren en neurobiologische kenmerken van mannelijke gedetineerden in Nederland,* Den Haag: Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, WODC.

Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. New York: Aldine.

Denzin, N K & Lincoln, Y. S (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. sage.

Deschuyteneer, L., Breuls, L., & Vanhouche, A.-S. (2023). Het recente CPT-rapport voor België: Weinig reden tot optimisme. *Panopticon*: pp. 78-84.

De Waele, J. P., & Depreeuw, W. (1985). *Opleiding voor penitentiaire ambtenaren*. Brussel: Ministerie van Justitie.

DGW/Ministerie van Justitie. (1981). *Nota inzake een herziene gestandaardiseerde inrichtingsstructuur en de functie van de inrichtingswerker.* 's-Gravenhage: DGW/Ministerie van Justitie.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: Qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 61-79.

Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen (2009) *Masterplan Gevangeniswezen 2009-2014. Een nieuwe visie op capaciteitsmanagement en personeelsbeleid.* Den Haag. Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen.

Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen (2013) *Masterplan DJI 2013-2018.* Den Haag. Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen.

Douglas, M., 2001. Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo. London: Routledge.

DPMO/Directie Personeels-, Management- en Organisatieontwikkeling, (2019). *DJI 2025: Robuust en Flexibel. Strategisch Personeelsplan DJI 2019-2024,* Den Haag: Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid.

Dullum, J., & Ugelvik, T. (2012). Introduction: exceptional prisons, exceptional societies? In T. Ugelvik & J. Dullum (Eds.). Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice. pp. 1- 11.

Dunbar, I. (1985) *A sense of direction,* Londen: Home Office.

Duncombe, J., & Jessop, J. (2012). 'Doing rapport' and the ethics of 'faking friendship'. In T. Miller, M. Birch, M. Mauthner, & J. Jessop (Eds.), *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54-63.

Elbers, J.M. (2024) *Reward systems in prison,* [PhD Thesis, Universiteit Leiden]. Meijers.

Eriksson, A. (2016) 'Othering in penal policy and practice: A comparative study'. In: Eriksson A (eds) *Punishing the Other: The Social Production of Immorality Revisited*. Oxford: Routledge, 77-100.

Eriksson, A. (2021). The Taint of The Other: Prison Work as 'Dirty Work' In Australia. *Punishment & Society*, *25*(2), 324-342.

Evans, D.N., Al-Muwahid, A., Allah, S., Bright, M., Kyler, S., Loyal, I., Martin, A., Shantai, R., Sheppard, A. & Thompson, H. (2023). Autoethnographic Analyses of Prison Design's Impacts. In D. Moran, Y. Jewkes, K.L. Blount-Hill, & V.S. John, (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of prison design*. Cham: Springer International Publishing: pp. 513-536.

Farkas, M. A. (1997). The Normative Code Among Correctional Officers: An exploration of Components and Functions. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, *20*(1), 23-36.

Farkas, M. A. (1999). Correctional officer attitudes toward inmates and working with inmates in a "get tough" era. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 27*, 495-506.

Farkas, M A & Manning, P K (1997) The Occupational Culture of Corrections and Police Officers. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, *20*(2), 51-68.

Fassin, D., (2016). *Prison Worlds: An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

FNV/Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (2017), *Onderzoek werkdruk bij dienst justitiële inrichtingen. 'Op te veel plekken te weinig ogen'*, FNV Overheid in opdracht van FNV.

Fletcher, A. J. (2016). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(2), 181-194.

Fransson E, Giofrè F. & Johnsen B (2018) *Prison, Architecture and Humans*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Froment, J. (1998). *La république des surveillants de prison: ambiguïtés et paradoxes d'une politique pénitentiaire en France*. Paris: LGDJ.

Garland, D. (2013) Penality and the penal state. *Criminology; An Interdisciplinary Journal* 51(3): 475-517.

Garrihy, J (2020) There are fourteen grey areas: Jailing, professionalism and legitimacy in prison officers' occupational cultures. *Irish Probation Journal*: pp.128-150.

Garrihy, J (2021) 'That Doesn't Leave You': Psychological Dirt and Taint in Prison Officers' Occupational Cultures and Identities. *The British Journal of Criminology*: pp.982-999.

Garrihy, J (2023) 'It's a Very Clannish Type of a Job': Entitativity and Identity in Prison Officers' Occupational Cultures and Identities. In Arnold H, Maycock M & Ricciardelli R (Eds.) *Prison Officers. International Perspectives on Prison Work.* Palgrave: pp.163-188.

Garrihy, J & Watters, A (2020) The Emotion and Emotional Labour of Criminological Researchers. Emotions and agency in prison research. *Methodological Innovations*: pp.1-14.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.

Gifford, R. (2007). *Environmental psychology: Principles and practice* (4th ed.). Colville, WA: Optimal Books.

Gilbert, M.J., 1997. The illusion of structure: A critique of the classical model of organization and the discretionary power of correctional officers. *Criminal Justice Review, 22*(1), pp.49-64.

Goffman, E. (1959), *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums.* USA: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Gooch K (2020) The opportunity, challenges and politics of prison leadership. Prison Service Journal 247: 14-24.

Grapendaal, M., van der Linden, B. & Rook, A. (1985) *Regiem in ontwikkeling: Verslag van een onderzoek onder de gedetineerdenbevolking van het Huis van Bewaring te Rotterdam*, 's-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, Ministerie van Justitie, Directie Gevangeniswezen/WODC.

Gravesteijn, J., de Koning, J., de Vleeschouwer, E. & van der Toorn, A.-J., (2018) *Werkklimaat DJI,* Rotterdam: SEOR.

Gredecki, N. & Horrocks, C. (2017) 'Crafting Identity': Constructions of the prison officer role. In: Jane L, Carol A, Gredecki, N. & Fisher, M. (Eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Forensic Psychology in Secure Settings.* Routledge Handbooks, Abingdon.

Griffin, M. L., Armstrong, G. S., & Hepburn, J. R. (2005). Correctional Officers' Perceptions of Equitable Treatment in the Masculinized Prison Environment. *Criminal Justice Review, 30*(2), 189-206.

Griffin, M. L., Hogan, N. L., Lambert, E. G., Tucker-Gail, K. A., & Baker, D. N. (2009). Job Involvement, Job Stress, Job Satisfaction, and Organizational Commitment and the Burnout of Correctional Staff. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *37*(2), 239-255.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261-280.

Grzesiak, S., Rychlik, J., & Nowogrodzka, A. (2021). Spatial features of a penitentiary unit in the context of stress experienced by Prison Service staff. *Nieruchomości*: pp.97-114.

Haggerty, K. D. (2004). Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative Sociology*, 27(4), 391-414.

Haggerty, K.D. & Bucerius, S.M. (2020) Picking battles: Correctional officers, rules and discretion in prison. *Criminology* 137-157.

Haggerty, K.D., & Ericson, R.V. (2000). The surveillant assemblage. *The British journal of sociology, 51 4*, 605-22 .

Halsey, M & Deegan, S. (2017) In Search of Generativity in Prison Officer Work: Balancing Care and Control in Custodial Settings. *The Prison Journal:* 52-78.

Hammersley, M (2018) What is ethnography? Can I survive it? Should it? *Ethnography and Education*: pp.1-17

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Hammerlin, Y. and Mathiassen, C. (2006) *Then and Now: On the Consequences of Increased Delegation of Tasks for the Relations between Correctional Staff and Prisoners in a Selection of Closed Prisons*. Report no. 5/2006. Oslo: Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy (KRUS)

Hancock, P. & Jewkes, Y. (2011) Architectures of Incarceration: the spatial pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society* 13(5), 611-629.

Haney C, Banks C and Zimbardo P (1973) Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology & Penology* 11: 69-97.

Haney, C., & Lynch, M. (1997). Regulating prisons of the future: A psychological analysis of supermax and solitary confinement. *New York University Review of Law & Social Change*, *23*(4), 477-570.

Hanrath, J., van Asch, R., Talan, A., & de Vogel, V. (2019). *Over de ontwikkeling van vakmanschap op begeleiding bij re-integratie na detentie*. Hogeschool Utrecht.

Higgins E M, Smith J & Swartz K (2022) “We keep the nightmares in their cages”: Correctional culture, identity, and the warped badge of honor, *Criminology*, pp. 429-454.

Hemsworth K (2016) ‘Feeling the range’: emotional geographies of sound in prisons. Emotion, *Space and Society 20*, 90-97.

Herrity, K., Schmidt, B.E. & Warr, J. (2021) *Sensory Penalties: Exploring the Senses in Spaces of Punishment and Social Control*. Bingley: Emerald.

Hillier, B. & Hanson, J. (1988) *The social logic of space*. Cambridge University Press.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feelings.* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Home Office (1984), *Managing the Long-Term Prison System (The Report of the Control Review Committee)*, London: HMSO.

Horowitz, V. L., Greberman, E. R., Nolan, P. E., Hyatt, J. M., Uggen, C., Andersen, S. N., & Chanenson, S. L. (2021). A comparative perspective on officer wellness: American reflections from Norwegian prisons. *Criminal Justice Studies*, *34*(4), 477-497.

Hughes, E.C., 1951. Work and the Self. In: J.H. Rohrer and M. Sherif, eds., Social psychology at the crossroads. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Hughes, E.C., 1962. Good People and Dirty Work. *Social Problems, 10*(1), pp.3-11.

Huisman, P. (1996). Kennis gewogen. Analyse van sociaalwetenschappelijk denken: Kritiek en aanwijzingen. Assen: Van Gorcum.

Humblet, D. (2020). Locking out emotions in locking up older prisoners? Emotional labour of Belgian prison officers and prison nurses. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*

Inspectie Justitie en Veiligheid (2016) *Risico's implementatie Masterplan DJI 2013-2018. Veranderingen in het gevangeniswezen nader beschouwd.* Den Haag. Inspectie Veiligheid en Justitie.

Inspectie Justitie en Veiligheid, (2018) *Uit Balans. Een onderzoek naar de kwaliteit van de taakuitvoering in zes locaties binnen het Gevangeniswezen,* Den Haag. Inspectie Veiligheid en Justitie.

Jacobs, J.B. & Retsky, H. (1980) Prison guard. In: Crouch, B. (Ed.) The Keepers: Prison Guards and Contemporary Corrections. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.

Jefferson, A.M. & Gaborit, L.S., (2015). Close encounters between prisoners and prison staff. In: Jefferson, A.M. & Gaborit, L.S. (Eds.) *Human Rights in Prison. Comparing Institutional Encounters in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and the Philippines.* Palgrave macmillen.

Jefferson, A., Turner, S., & Jensen, S. (2018). Introduction: On Stuckness and Sites of Confinement. *Ethnos*, *84*(1), 1-13.

Jewkes, Y. (2014). An introduction to "Doing prison research differently. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(4), 387-391.

Jewkes, Y. (2018). Just design: Healthy prisons and the architecture of hope. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, *51*(3), 319-338.

Johnsen, B., Granheim, P. K., & Helgesen, J. (2011). Exceptional prison conditions and the quality of prison life: Prison size and prison culture in Norwegian closed prisons. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8, 515-529

Johnsen, B., Bartoszko, A., Fransson, E., Pape, H. & Giofrè F. (2023). The translation of humanity into prison design: How do the new, standardized "Model 2015" prison buildings meet normative demands in Norwegian crime policy?. *Archives of Criminology*, 85-114.

Johnston, N. (2000). *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture*. University of Illinois Press.

Karthaus R, Block L and Hu A (2019) Redesigning prison: the architecture and ethics of rehabilitation. *The Journal of Architecture 24*(2): 193-222.

Kauffman K (1988). *Prison officers and their world*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kelly, D. (2014). Punish or reform? Predicting prison staff punitiveness. *The Howard Journal*, *53*(1), 49-68.

King, S. (2009). Reconciling Custodial and Human Service Work: The Complex Role of the Prison Officer. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, *21*(2), 257-272.

Kjelsberg, E., Skoglund, T.H. & Rustad, A-B. (2007) Attitudes towards prisoners, as reported by prison inmates, prison employees and college students. *BMC Public Health* 7, 71.

Kolind, T., Frank, V.A., Lindberg, O. & Tourunen, J. (2015) Officers and Drug Counsellors: New Occupational Identities in Nordic Prisons, *The British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(2), 303-320

Kommer, M. (1991) *De gevangenis als werkplek*, Arnhem: Gouda Quint.

Kommer, M. (2018) "Terug in de bajes", *Sancties: Tijdschrift over straffen en maatregelen, 1*(3), 23-33.

Korczynski, M. (2003). Communities of Coping: Collective Emotional Labour in Service Work. *Organization*, *10*(1), 55-79.

Kreiner, G.E., Ashforth, B.E. & Sluss, D.M., (2006). Identity Dynamics in Occupational Dirty Work: Integrating Social Identity and System Justification Perspectives. *Organization Science, 17*(5), pp.619-636.

Kruml, S.M. and Geddes, D., 2000. Exploring the Dimensions of Emotional Labor The Heart of Hochschild's Work. *Management communication quarterly, 14*(1), pp.8-49.

Kruttschnitt C and Dirkzwager A (2011) Are there still contrasts in tolerance? Imprisonment in the Netherlands and England 20 years later. *Punishment & Society 13*(3): 283-306.

Laemers, M., Vegter, P. & Fiselier, J. (2001) *Evaluatie Penitentiaire Beginselenwet en Penitentiaire maatregel*. WODC: Nijmegen.

Laverick, W. (2010). Accessing inside: Ethical dilemmas and pracmatic compromises. In J. Scott Jones & S. Watt (Eds.), *Ethnography in social science practice*. Routledge.

Layder, D. (1990). *The realist image in social science*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Layder, D (2004), Emotion in social life: The lost heart of society. In A. Liebling (2013). Identity and emotion in a high security prison. *Criminal Justice Matters, 91*, 22-23.

Lemmergaard, J. and Muhr, S.L. (2012), 'Golfing with a Murderer—Professional Indifference and Identity Work in a Danish Prison', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *28*, 185-95.

Lerman, A.E. (2013) The Modern Prison Paradox: Politics, Punishment, and Social Community. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lerman, A.E. & Page, J. (2012) The state of the job: An embedded work role perspective on prison officer attitudes, *Punishment & Society, 14*(5), 503-529.

Liebling, A. (1999). Doing research in prison: Breaking the silence? Theoretical Criminology, 3(2), 147-173.

Liebling, A. (2000) Prison officers, policing and the use of discretion. *Theoretical Criminology*: pp.333-357.

Liebling, A. (2001). Whose side are we on? Theory, practice and allegiances in prisons research. *British Journal of Criminology*, 41(3), 472-484.

Liebling A (2004) *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Liebling A (2007) Why prison staff culture matters. In: Byrne J, Taxman F and Hummer D (Eds.) *The Culture of Prison Violence*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 105-122.

Liebling, A. (2008) Why prison staff culture matters. In: Byre J.M., Hummer, D. & Taxman, F.S. (Eds.) *The Culture of Prison Violence.* Boston: Pearson.

Liebling, A. (2011). Distinctions and distinctiveness in the work of prison officers: Legitimacy and authority revised. *European Journal of Criminology*, *8*(6), 484-499.

Liebling, A., Durie, L., Stiles, A. & Tait, S. (2005) Revisiting prison suicide. The role of fairness and distress. In : Liebling, A. & Maruna, S. (Eds.). *The Effects of Imprisonment.* London, Willan.

Liebling, A., Johnsen, B., Schmidt, B.E., Rokkan, T., Beyens, K., Boone, M., Kox, M. & Vanhouche, A.-S. (2020) Where two 'exceptional' prison cultures meet: Negotiating order in a transnational prison. *British Journal of Criminology*: pp.1-20

Liebling, A & Kant, D (2016) The Two Cultures: Correctional Officers and Key Differences in Institutional Climate. In Woolredge, J & Smith, P. (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Prisons and Imprisonment.* Oxford University Press. PP; 208-234.

Liebling, A Price, D & Shefer, G (2011) *The Prison Officer. Second Edition.* England: Willan.

Lin AC (2000) *Reform in the Making: The Implementation of Social Policy in Prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lipsky, M. (1980). Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services. Russell Sage Foundation.

Lombardo, L. X. (1985). Group dynamics and the prison guard subculture: Is the subculture an impediment to helping inmates?. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *29*(1), 79-90.

Maculan, A., & Rodelli, M. (2022). Prison officers and esprit de corps. Ingroup and outgroup relationships in prison. *Punishment & Society*, *25*(4), 1023-1041.

Maes, E., (2010) "Evoluties in punitiviteit: lessen uit de justitiële statistieken", In: I. Aertsen, K. Beyens, T. Daems & E. Maes (eds.), *Hoe punitief is België?*, Gent: Maklu, 43-83

Malinowski, B. (1922). Ethnology and the Study of Society. *Economica*, *6*, 208-219.

Manning, P K (2007) A dialectic of organisational and occupational culture. In O'Neill M, Marks M & Allen A-M (Eds.) *Police Occupational Culture, Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance vol. 8.* Oxford: Elsevier. pp. 47-83.

Mario, B., Ricciardelli, R., Johnston, M. S., & Sibley, M. A. (2024). Examining the intersection of carceral space and well-being: Correctional officers' perspectives on old and new prison design. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes*, *68*(4), 549-559.

Marshall, S. (1997). Control in Category C Prisons. Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate. *Research Findings, 54*, 1-4.

Martin, J. L., Lichtenstein, B., Jenkot, R. B., & Forde, D. R. (2012). "They Can Take Us Over Any Time They Want": Correctional Officers' Responses to Prison Crowding: Correctional Officers' Responses to Prison Crowding. *The Prison Journal*, *92*(1), 88-105.

McMurray, R. and Ward, J. (2014).'Why would you want to do that?': Defining emotional dirty work, *Human Relations*, 67(9), pp.1123-114

McNeill, F., Burns, N., Halliday, S., Hutton, N. and Tata, C. (2009) Risk, responsibility and reconfiguration: penal adaptation and misadaptation, *Punishment & Society*, *11*(14): 419-442.

Mears, D. P., Aranda-Hughes, V., Pesta, G. B., Brown, J. M., & Bales, W. D. (2023). Captives of the "Society of Captives": Working in Solitary Confinement. *The Prison Journal*, *103*(4), 513-540.

Melossi, D (2001) The cultural embeddedness of social control: Reflections on the comparison of Italian and North-American cultures concerning punishment. *Theoretical Criminology 5*(4): 403-424.

Mertens, A., Maes, E., & Robert, L. (2021). Telefoon achter de tralies : een verkennend onderzoek naar telefonie op cel. *PANOPTICON*, *42*(2), 97-115.

Meško, G., & Hacin, R. (2019). Social Distance Between Prisoners and Prison Staff. *The Prison Journal*, *99*(6), 706-724.

Mikkelsen, E. N. (2022). Looking over your shoulder: Embodied responses to contamination in the emotional dirty work of prison officers. *Human Relations*, *75*(9), 1770-1797.

Miller, D.T. & McFarland, C. (1987) Pluralistic ignorance : When Similarity is interpreted as dissimilarity. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 53*(2), 298-305.

Ministerie van Justitie. (1982). *Taak en toekomst van het Nederlandse gevangeniswezen* (Kamerstukken II 1981/82, 17 539, nrs. 1-2). 's-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Justitie.

Ministerie van Justitie. (1994). *Werkzame detentie* (Kamerstukken II 1993/94, 22 999, nrs. 10-11). 's-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Justitie.

Ministerie van Justitie. (2008). *Brief van de minister en de staatssecretaris van Justitie aan de voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal* (Kamerstukken II 2007/08, 24 587, nr. 299). Den Haag: Ministerie van Justitie.

Molleman, T. (2021) "Toen en nu: heeft het gevangeniswezen de middelen om zijn doelen te bereiken?", *Justitiële verkenningen*, 24-39.

Molleman, T., Leeuw, F.L. & Bogaerts, S. (2012). De relatie tussen de bejegeningstijl van gevangenispersoneel en de detentieomstandigheden van gedetineerden. *Sancties*, p. 242-249.

Moors, J, von Bergh, M., Bogaerts, S., van Poppel, J. & van Kalmthout, A., (2004) *Kiezen voor delen? Evaluatie van de eerste fase van de invoering van meerpersoonscelgebruik,* Den Haag: Boom Juridische uitgevers.

Moran, D., Turner, J., & Jewkes, Y. (2016). Becoming big things: building events and the architectural geographies of incarceration in England and Wales. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *41*(4), 416-428.

Moran, D., Turner, J., & Schliehe, A. K. (2018). Conceptualizing the carceral in carceral geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, *42*(5), 666-686.

Moran, D., & Turner, J. (2021). Drill, discipline and decency? Exploring the significance of prior military experience for prison staff culture. *Theoretical Criminology*, *26*(3), 396-415.

Morgan, R. (1994). Thoughts about control in prisons. *Prison Service Journal*, 57-60.

Morgan, R. (1997). Are custody, control and justice compatible? The aims of imprisonment revisited. In A. Liebling (Ed.), *Security, Justice and Order in Prison: Developing Perspectives*. Cambridge: The Institute of Criminology: pp.62-70.

Morris, N., (1998). *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. Oxford University Press

Morris, R. G., & Worrall, J. L. (2010). Prison Architecture and Inmate Misconduct: A Multilevel Assessment: A Multilevel Assessment. *Crime & Delinquency*, *60*(7), 1083-1109.

Morrison, K., & Maycock, M. (2021). Becoming a prison officer: An analysis of the early development of prison officer cultures. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 60*(1), 3-24.

Nadel, M. R. (2023). Defining the Mechanisms of Design: An Interdisciplinary Approach. In Moran, D., Jewkes, Y., Blount-Hill, K. L., & John, V. S. (Eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Design*. Palgrave Macmillan: pp.51-78.

Nelken D (2010) *Comparative Criminal Justice*. New York: SAGE.

Nelken D (2011) Theorizing the embeddedness of punishment. In: Melossi D, Sozzo M and Sparks R (eds) *Travels of the Criminal Question: Cultural Embeddedness and Diffusion*. Oxford: Hart.

Nielsen, M. M. (2011). On humour in prison. *European Journal of Criminology*, *8*(6), 500-514.

Nixon, S & Woodward, D (2024) *Role Exit in Prison Officers. Returning to 'Civvy Street'.* Routledge.

Nowicka-Kostrzewska, J., & Rożnowski, B. (2022). "Personality in prison uniform". The influence of personality on building work engagement, applying job crafting strategies and well-being among prison officers. *Current issues in personality psychology*, *11*(4), 283-296.

Nylander, P.A. (2011) *Managing the Dilemma. Occupational Culture and Identity among Prison Officers.* Örebro University.

Nylander, P.-Å., Lindberg, O., & Bruhn, A. (2011). Emotional labour and emotional strain among Swedish prison officers. *European Journal of Criminology*, *8*(6), 469-483.

O'Connell, C., & Rogan, M. (2023). Monitoring Prisons in Europe: Understanding Perspectives of People in Prison and Prison Staff. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *48*(1), 205-235.

Owen, B. (1988) *The Reproduction of Social Control: A Study of Prison Workers at San Quentin*. New York: Praeger.

Page, J. (2012) Punishment and the penal field. In: Simon J and Sparks R (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Punishment and Society*. London: Sage, pp. 152-166.

Pallot, J Piacentini, L & Moran, D (2010) "Patriotic discourses in Russia's penal peripheries: Remembering the Mordovan Gulag. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *62*(1), 1-30.

Pardon, L Gossy, E Beyens, K & Vanhouche A-S (2025) Marooned at work: The impact of prison officer isolation on occupational culture. *The Howard Journal*: pp.1-12

Peacock, M., Turner, M., & Varey, S. (2017). 'We Call it Jail Craft': The Erosion of the Protective Discourses Drawn on by Prison Officers Dealing with Ageing and Dying Prisoners in the Neoliberal, Carceral System. *Sociology*, *52*(6), 1152-1168.

Polfliet, k. (2015). De Vlaamse hulp- en dienstverlening en de federale Basiswet: twee handen op één buik?! In Daems, T., Hermans, C., Janssens, F., Millen, J., Robert, L., & Scheirs, V. (Eds.). *Quo vadis? Tien jaar basiswet gevangeniswezen en rechtspositie van gedetineerden*. Maklu. (pp. 169-203). Antwerpen-Apeldoorn: Maklu. pp. 169-203

Poole, E & Regoli, R (1981) Alienation in Prison: An Examination of the Work Relations of Prison Guard. *Criminology, 19,* 251-270.

Pratt, J. (2008). Scandinavian Exceptionalism in an Era of Penal Excess: Part II: Does Scandinavian Exceptionalism Have a Future? *The British Journal of Criminology*, *48*(3), 275-292.

Pratt, J., & Eriksson, A. (2013). *Contrasts in Punishment: An Explanation of Anglophone Excess and Nordic Exceptionalism*. London: Routledge.

RSJ/Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming (2012) *Goed bejegenen. Beginselen voor het overheidsoptreden tegenover mensen die een justitiële straf of maatregel ondergaan,* Den Haag. RSJ.

RSJ/Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming (2019) *Spanning in detentie,* Den Haag: RSJ.

Reisig, M. D., & Mesko, G. (2009). Procedural justice, legitimacy, and prisoner misconduct. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, *15*(1), 41-59.

Rimmer, S. (2001). Leading The Development Of Wandsworth Prison: Some Personal Reflections. *Probation Journal*, *49*, 151-154.

Rivera, K. D. (2014). Emotional Taint: Making Sense of Emotional Dirty Work at the U.S. Border Patrol: Making Sense of Emotional Dirty Work at the U.S. Border Patrol. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *29*(2), 198-228.

Robberechts, J. & Beyens, K. (2020) PrisonCloud: The Beating Heart of the Digital Prison Cell. In J. Turner, & V. Knight (Eds.), *The Prison Cell: Embodied and Everyday Spaces of Incarceration.* Palgrave Macmillan. 283-303.

Rogan, M. (2019) Prison Inspection and Monitoring: The need to reform European Law and Policy. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 27, 285-305.

Roks, R Custers, G Staring, R Jansen, J Struijk S & Stigter, J (2024) *Grip of in de Greep? Een onderzoek naar de gevolgen van de aanpak van ondermijnende criminaliteit voor de Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen*. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and Social Science*. Sage.

Sayer, A. (2010). *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Schoenfeld, H., & Everly, G. (2022). The security mindset: Corrections officer workplace culture in late mass incarceration. *Theoretical Criminology*, *27*(2), 224-244.

Scott, D. (2008). Creating ghosts in the penal machine: Prison officer occupational morality and the techniques of denial. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe, & A. Wahidin (Eds.), *Understanding prison staff*. Willan Publishing.

Scott, D. (2014). Prison research: Appreciative or critical inquiry? *Criminal Justice Matters*, *95*(1), 30-31.

Scott, D. (2015). Critical research values and C. Wright Mills sociological imagination: Learning lessons from researching prison officers. In J. Frauley (Ed.), *C. Wright Mills and the Criminological Imagination: Prospects for Creative Inquiry*. Routledge.

Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman.* New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press.

Seymour, K. (2018). Inhabiting the Australian prison: Masculinities, violence and identity work. In M. Maycock & K. Hunt (eds.), *New Perspectives on Prison Masculinities*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology

Shefer, G., & Liebling, A. (2008). Prison privatization: In search of a business-like atmosphere. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, *8*, 261-278.

Sim, J. (2008) An inconvenient criminological truth: pain punishment and prison officers. In: Bennett J, Crewe B & Wahidin A (Eds.) *Understanding Prison Staff*. London: Willan, pp.187-209.

Simmons, E. S., & Smith, N. R. (2019). The Case for Comparative Ethnography. *Comparative Politics*, *51*(3), 341-359.

Simpson, R., Slutskaya, N., Lewis, P. and Höpfl, H. (2012), *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Skolnick, J. (1966). *Justice without Trial: Law Enforcement in Democratic Society*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Slotboom, A.-M., Kruttschnitt, C., Bijleveld, C., & Menting, B. (2011). Psychological well-being of incarcerated women in the Netherlands: Importation or deprivation? *Punishment & Society*, *13*(2), 176-197.

Snacken, S. (1999). Long-term prisoners and violent offenders. In C. o. Europe (Ed.), 12th Conference of Directors of Prison Administration: proceedings (pp. 43-73). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Snacken, S. (2005). Forms of violence and regimes in prison: report of research in Belgian prisons. In A. Liebling & S. Maruna (Eds.), The effects of imprisonment (pp. 306-339). Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Snacken, S. (2015) "Tien jaar Basiswet – 'Back to basics'" in Daems, T., Hermans, C., Janssens, F., Millen, J., Robert, L. en Scheirs, V. (Eds), *Quo vadis? Tien jaar basiswet gevangeniswezen en rechtspositie van gedetineerden*, Antwerpen, Maklu: pp.179-203.

Snacken, S., Devynck, C. & Uzieblo, K. (2022) Dignity, Social Reintegration of Prisoners, and the New Penal Power: European Human Rights, Experiences of Belgian Prisoners, and Professional Practices. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*: pp.980-1000.

Snacken, S., Mary, P., Beghin, J., Bellis, P., Bogaert, T., & Janssen, P. (2000). *De problematiek van geweld in gevangenissen*. Brussel: Ondezoeksrapport VUB-ULB.

Sommer, R. (1971). The social psychology of the cell environment. *The Prison Journal, 51*(1), 15-21.

Sparks, R., & Bottoms, A. E. (1995). Legitimacy and Order in Prisons. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *46*, 45-62.

Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). Prisons and the Problem of Order. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(1), 76-84.

Stohr, M. K., & Walsh, A. (2018). Ethics and corrections. In M. K. Stohr & A. Walsh (Eds.), *Corrections: From research, to policy, to practice*. SAGE.

Struijk, S. (2020) Duizelingwekkende en zorgwekkende ontwikkelingen in de rechtspositie van gedetineerden, *Boom Strafblad*, *1*(5), 265-273.

Sykes, G.M. and Matza, D., (1957). Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency. *American Sociological Review, 22*(6), p.664.

Sykes G (2007 [1958]) The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Syr, J.-H. (1996). Le contrôle dans les prisons: revue de littérature. In C. Faugeron, A. Chauvenet & P. Combessie (Eds.), *Approches de la prison* (pp. 245-270). Bruxelles: De Boeck.

Tait, S. (2011). A typology of prison officer approaches to care. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8, 440-454.

Tamatea, A.J., Day, A.J., & Cooke, D.J. (2023). *Preventing Prison Violence: An Ecological Perspective* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Taylor, D.G. (1982) Pluralistic Ignorance and the spiral of silence: A formal analysis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 46*(3), 311-335.

Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure, and process.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Tims, M., Bakker, A. B., & Derks, D. (2013). The impact of job crafting on job demands, job resources, and wellbeing. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 18, 234-245.

Tournel, H (2015) *De gevangenisbewaarder: Het professioneel leven in beeld*. Panopticon Libri, Antwerp: Maklu.

Tracy, S.J. (2004) The Construction of Correctional Officers: Layers of emotionality behind bars. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *10*(4), 509-533.

Tracy, S. & Scott, C. (2007). Dirty Work and Discipline Behind Bars. In: S.K. Drew, MB. Mills and B.M. Gassaway, (Eds.), *Dirty Work: The Social Construction of Taint*. Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press. 33-53.

Turner, J., Moran, D., & Jewkes, Y. (2022). 'It's in the air here': Atmosphere(s) of incarceration. *Incarceration: An International Journal of Imprisonment, Detention and Coercive Confinement*, *3*(3).

Turner, J. & Peters, K. (2015) Unlocking carceral atmospheres: designing visual/material encounters at the prison museum. *Visual Communication 14*(3): 309-330.

Tyler, R.T. (2006) Restorative Justice and Procedural Justice: Dealing with Rule Breaking, *Journal of Social Sciences, 62*(2), 307-326.

Quraishi, M., Irfan, L., Schneuwly Purdie, M., & Wilkinson, M. L. N. (2021). Doing 'judgemental rationality' in empirical research: the importance of depth-reflexivity when researching in prison. *Journal of Critical Realism*, *21*(1), 25-45.

van den Hoonaard, W. C. (2001). Is research-ethics review a moral panic? *Canadian Review of Sociology*, *38*(1), 19-36.

Van Dijk, M., Maesschalk, J. & Daems, T. (2021) Beyond custody versus care: Understanding ethical dilemmas of prison officers in Belgium. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research, 29*, 71-89.

Van Dijk, M. (2023) *Dilemmas behind bars. A realist evaluation of an ethics training program for prison officers in two Belgian prisons*. Boom juridisch Antwerpen.

van Ginneken, E.F.J.C. (2018) 'Zelfredzaamheid in detentie. Kritische kanttekeningen bij het systeem van promoveren en degraderen', *Tijdschrift voor de* rechtspleging: 113-129

van Ginneken, E. & Abbing, Y. (2024) *Afstand, nabijheid en sociale veiligheid. Een onderzoek in penitentiaire inrichtingen voor vrouwen,* Universiteit Leiden.

Vanhouche, A.-S. (2022). *Prison Food Identity, Meaning, Practices, and Symbolism in European Prisons*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vanhouche, A.-S., De Bolle, E., De Bus, S., Edame, E., Janssens, G., Muësen, L., & Robberechts, J. (2021). Waarden in een waardeloze situatie: Reflecties op de Basiswet gevangeniswezen van bevriende penologen die werken en leven in de gevangenis. In K. Beyens, D. Humblet, H. Tubex, A.-S. Vanhouche, & K. Verfaillie (Eds.), *Sonja Snacken: Een redelijk eigenzinnige humaniste/un humaniste engagé/an insparing humanist*. VUB Press. pp. 271-279.

van Hoven, B., & Sibley, D. (2008). 'Just duck': the role of vision in the production of prison spaces. *Environment and Planning, 26*, 1001-1017.

van Kleef, D. (2019) "On speaking terms: de impact van prestatiemanagement op het Nederlands gevangeniswezen", *Sancties: Tijdschrift over straffen en maatregelen,* 25-37.

Van Maanen, J. and Schein, E.H. (1979) Toward of Theory of Organizational Socialization. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, *1*, 209-264.

van Zyl Smit, D., & Snacken, S (2009). *Principles of European Prison Law and Policy—Penology and Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2002). The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration. *Ethnography*, *3*(4), 371-397.

Watkins-Hayes, C. (2009). *The new welfare bureaucrats*. University of Chicago Press.

Weinrath, M., Budzinski, C., & Melnyk, T. (2016). Visualizing prison life: Does prison architecture influence correctional officer behaviour? An exploratory study. *The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research,* 291-311.

Wooldredge, J., and Steiner, B. (2014). A bi-level framework for understanding prisoner victimization. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *30*, 141-162.

Woolf, L. J. (1991). *Prison disturbances, April 1990: Report of an inquiry*. London, England: HMSO.

Wouters, K., Loyens, K., Maesschalck, J., & De Schrijver, A. (2014). Morele dilemma's bij criminologisch onderzoek. *Panopticon: Tijdschrift voor Strafrecht, Criminologie en Forensisch Welzijnswerk*, *35*(4), 313-335.

Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *Academy of Management Review, 26*, 179-201.

Wynn, L. L., & Israel, M. (2018). The fetishes of consent: Signatures, paper, and writing in research ethics review. *American Anthropologist*, *120*(4), 795-806.

Zwezerijnen, J.J.A. (1972) *Dwang en vertrouwen: een empirisch onderzoek naar de machtsrelaties tussen bewaarders en gedetineerden*, Alphen aan den Rijn: Samson Uitgeverij NV.

Appendix

Table 1. Participant demographics prison A

Respondent #	*Age*	*Gender*	*Length of Service*	*Block #*	*Worked in another prison before*
1	46-50	Male	5+	2	Yes
2	51-55	Male	15+	2	Yes
3	51-55	Male	25+	2	Yes
4	36-40	Female	<5	1	No
5	26-30	Male	5+	1	No
6	56-60	Male	30+	1	Yes
7	21-25	Female	<5	2	No
8	41-45	Male	15+	2	No
9	26-30	Female	<5	2	No
10	46-50	Male	10+	2	Yes
11	46-50	Female	5+	1	No
12	56-60	Female	25+	1	Yes
13	41-45	Female	10+	1	No
14	26-30	Male	<5	2	No
15	21-25	Female	<5	3	No
16	36-40	Male	5+	3	No
17	51-55	Female	15+	3	Yes
18	26-30	Female	<5	3	Yes
19	31-35	Female	5+	1	Yes
20	51-55	Male	30+	2	Yes
21	51-55	Male	25+	3	Yes
22	46-50	Male	5+	3	Yes
23	51-55	Female	15+	3	No
24	51-55	Male	25+	3	Yes

Table 2. Participant demographics prison B

Respondent #	*Age*	*Gender*	*Length of Service*	*Worked in another prison before*
1	51-55	Male	30+	Yes
2	46-50	Female	10+	Yes
3	46-50	Male	25+	Yes
4	51-55	Male	30+	Yes
5	41-45	Female	10+	Yes
6	51-55	Male	20+	No

Table 3. Participant demographics prison C

Respondent #	*Age*	*Gender*	*Length of Service*	*PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$*	*Worked in another prison before*
1	46-50	Male	20+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
2	51-55	Male	25+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
3	41-45	Male	20+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
4	36-40	Female	10+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
5	26-30	Male	<5	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
6	36-40	Male	10+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
7	26-30	Male	<5	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
8	21-25	Male	<5	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
9	55-60	Male	30+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
10	41-45	Female	5+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
11	26-30	Female	5+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
12	56-60	Male	25+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
13	41-45	Male	15+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
14	51-60	Male	20+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
15	21-25	Female	<5	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
16	46-50	Male	25+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
17	51-55	Male	20+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
18	41-45	Female	20+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
19	41-45	Male	15+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
20	51-55	Male	25+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$/SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
21	31-35	Male	<5	SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
22	31-35	Male	5+	SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes
23	46-50	Female	20+	SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
24	36-40	Male	<5	SO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	No
25	41-45	Male	15+	PO$^{\mathrm{NL}}$	Yes

Table 4. Participant demographics prison D

Respondent #	*Age*	*Gender*	*Length of Service*	*PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}*	*Worked in another prison before*
1	21-25	Female	<5	PO^{NL}	No
2	36-40	Male	<5	PO^{NL}	Yes
3	36-40	Male	15+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
4	36-40	Male	5+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	No
5	46-50	Male	15+	PO^{NL}	Yes
6	51-55	Male	25+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
7	26-30	Female	<5	PO^{NL}	No
8	41-45	Male	<5	PO^{NL}	No
9	31-35	Male	<5	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
10	46-50	Female	15+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
11	51-55	Female	30+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
12	46-50	Male	25+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
13	41-45	Male	<5	PO^{NL}	No
14	41-45	Male	20+	PO^{NL}/SO^{NL}	Yes
15	21-25	Male	20+	PO^{NL}	Yes
16	36-40	Female	<5	SO^{NL}	No
17	46-50	Male	15+	SO^{NL}	Yes
18	21-25	Male	<5	SO^{NL}	Yes
19	31-35	Male	<5	SO^{NL}	Yes

Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)

Vakmanschap van geüniformeerd penitentiair personeel in post-autoritaire gevangenissen

In de afgelopen decennia is het gevangeniswezen in West-Europa gekenmerkt door een verschuiving van klassieke, autoritaire detentiemodellen naar meer relationele en rechtengeoriënteerde benaderingen van strafuitvoering (Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2011; van Zyl Smit & Snacken, 2009). Deze ontwikkeling heeft belangrijke implicaties voor de rol van geüniformeerd penitentiair personeel, die zich steeds vaker moeten positioneren op het snijvlak van controle en zorg, afstand en nabijheid, en formele regels versus discretionair handelen. Tegen deze achtergrond staat het concept *jail craft* centraal: een analytisch begrip dat verwijst naar het vakmanschap van gevangenisbewaarders in het omgaan met de complexiteit van het dagelijks gevangenisleven.

De literatuur toont aan dat *jail craft* ontstaat op het kruispunt van verschillende dimensies, waaronder beroepscultuur, emotionele arbeid, stigma (*taint*), institutionele inbedding en carcerale ruimte. Deze dimensies bieden samen inzicht in hoe bewaarders hun werkpraktijken ontwikkelen, onderhouden en voortdurend aanpassen. *Jail craft* kan daarbij niet worden gereduceerd tot louter technische vaardigheden of impliciete kennis. Zoals Sennett (2008) benadrukt, impliceert vakmanschap een intrinsieke motivatie om het werk goed te verrichten omwille van het werk zelf. In de context van gevangenisarbeid vertaalt dit zich in een vorm van professionaliteit die niet enkel gebaseerd is op competentie, maar ook op moreel oordeel, aanwezigheid en aanspreekbaarheid op de werkvloer en relationeel inzicht (Crawley, 2004; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011).

Tegelijkertijd maakt de literatuur duidelijk dat *jail craft* geen individueel kenmerk is, maar een collectieve, cultureel ingebedde praktijk. Het wordt gevormd en overgedragen via gedeelde normen, informele regels en dagelijkse interacties tussen collega's. Gevangenisbewaarders leren hun vak niet primair via formele opleidingen, maar door samen te werken, ervaringen te delen en betekenis te geven aan situaties binnen de specifieke context van de gevangenis. In die zin functioneert *jail craft* als een vorm van professioneel erfgoed, dat tussen generaties wordt doorgegeven en voortdurend wordt herwerkt binnen institutionele grenzen.

Deze culturele dimensie sluit aan bij de literatuur over beroepscultuur van gevangenisbewaarders, waarin solidariteit, wantrouwen en moreel oordeel centrale elementen vormen (Crawley, 2004; Garrihy, 2023; Liebling, 2011). Cultuur biedt een interpretatief kader dat bepaalt wat als gepast, wenselijk of problematisch wordt beschouwd in het dagelijks handelen. Tegelijk kan deze cultuur ook beperkingen opleggen: coping mechanismen zoals emotionele distantie of cynisme kunnen reflectie en empathie ondermijnen, en zo het vakmanschap inperken.

Naast cultuur speelt ook de institutionele en ruimtelijke context een cruciale rol. De gevangenis is geen neutrale omgeving, maar een actieve structurerende kracht die bepaalt hoe werk wordt uitgevoerd. Bewaarders ontwikkelen een ruimtelijk bewustzijn dat hen toelaat om situaties te lezen, zich strategisch te positioneren en gepast te interveniëren. Deze dimensie sluit aan bij inzichten uit de carcerale geografie en het concept *proximity*, waarin wordt benadrukt hoe architectuur, zichtbaarheid en ontwerp de relationele mogelijkheden binnen detentie vormgeven (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015; Moran et al., 2018).

De gevangeniscontext stelt bovendien hoge emotionele en psychologische eisen aan bewaarders. Onderzoek toont aan dat zij gebruikmaken van sociale en psychologische strategieën, zoals humor, distantie en collegiale solidariteit, om om te gaan met de spanningen die inherent zijn aan zorg binnen een context van dwang (Crawley, 2004b; Garrihy, 2021; Peacock et al., 2017). Hoewel deze strategieën van buitenaf soms worden geïnterpreteerd als onverschilligheid, vormen zij essentiële mechanismen om emotionele belasting te reguleren en professionele coherentie te behouden. Emotionele arbeid is dan ook een kerncomponent van *jail craft*: het stelt bewaarders in staat om kwetsbaarheid om te zetten in professioneel handelen en controle uit te oefenen zonder empathie volledig te verliezen. Tegelijkertijd is dit vakmanschap steeds ingebed in bredere institutionele structuren en machtsverhoudingen, zoals benadrukt in de literatuur over *embeddedness* (Lerman & Page, 2012).

Om deze thematiek empirisch te onderzoeken, werd een vergelijkend etnografisch onderzoek uitgevoerd, bestaande uit dertien maanden veldwerk in vier gevangenissen, twee in België en twee in Nederland, en aangevuld met 76 semigestructureerde interviews. Vanuit een kritisch-realistische benadering richt de analyse zich niet enkel op observeerbare praktijken, maar ook op de onderliggende mechanismen en structuren die deze praktijken mogelijk maken of begrenzen.

De empirische analyse van gevangeniswerk in België en Nederland laat zien dat deze theoretische inzichten zich op uiteenlopende wijze vertalen in de praktijk. Beroepsidentiteit van gevangenisbewaarders blijkt geen vaststaand gegeven, maar het resultaat van een voortdurende interactie tussen wetgeving, organisatorische structuren en culturele dynamieken. Wetgevende kaders bepalen formele taken en verantwoordelijkheden, terwijl organisatorische structuren, zoals personeelsmodellen en regimevormen, de concrete uitvoering daarvan sturen. Cultuur fungeert als filter dat deze formele kaders vertaalt naar dagelijkse praktijken en betekenisgeving.

De vergelijking tussen België en Nederland maakt duidelijk dat deze processen contextafhankelijk zijn. In Nederland leidt een sterke functiedifferentiatie tot duidelijke scheidingen tussen beveiligingsgerichte en relationele rollen, wat de invulling van beroepsidentiteit structureert. In België daarentegen blijven deze rollen meer verweven, waarbij verschillen eerder voortkomen uit regimevormen (open versus gesloten instellingen) dan uit formele functiedifferentiatie. Deze variaties beïnvloeden hoe bewaarders hun rol interpreteren: in sterk gereguleerde en beveiligingsgerichte contexten wordt autoriteit vaker geassocieerd met controle en sanctionering, terwijl in meer relationele contexten meer nadruk ligt op interactie, onderhandeling en discretionair handelen.

Deze structurele en culturele verschillen hebben ook implicaties voor de emotionele belasting van het werk. De aard en intensiteit van psychologische druk variëren naargelang de positie van bewaarders binnen de inrichting. In sterk beveiligde contexten wordt vaker gebruikgemaakt van emotionele distantie en desensitisatie, terwijl in meer open en relationele settings bewaarders intensiever betrokken zijn bij interacties met gedetineerde personen. In Nederland worden bovendien spanningen zichtbaar tussen verschillende functiegroepen, waarbij uiteenlopende visies op 'goed gevangeniswerk' leiden tot spanningen en sociale scheidingslijnen tussen teams.

De institutionele context speelt hierbij een bepalende rol. Sterk restrictieve en bureaucratische settings leiden tot vervreemding en een uitholling van professionele identiteit. In extreme gevallen kan de nadruk op administratieve processen en gestandaardiseerde evaluaties leiden tot een verlies van betekenisgeving in het werk, waarbij bewaarders zich gereduceerd voelen tot uitvoerders van procedures in plaats van dragers van professionele kennis en ervaring.

Een centraal concept dat deze dynamieken verder verdiept, is *proximity*. Nabijheid blijkt geen statische of louter fysieke conditie, maar een dynamisch en relationeel fenomeen dat wordt gevormd door institutionele keuzes, ruimtelijke configuraties en dagelijkse praktijken. In sommige contexten leidt fysieke nabijheid niet noodzakelijk tot relationele betrokkenheid, terwijl in andere settings nabijheid juist een fundament vormt voor vertrouwen en informele vormen van gezag. Nabijheid kan zowel verbindend als vervreemdend werken, afhankelijk van hoe zij institutioneel wordt georganiseerd en beleefd.

De analyse toont aan dat nabijheid nauw verbonden is met de uitoefening van autoriteit. In contexten waar bewaarders actief participeren in het dagelijks leven van gedetineerde personen, ontstaat een vorm van relationele autoriteit die gebaseerd is op wederzijds begrip en erkenning. In meer gescheiden en technologisch gemedieerde omgevingen wordt autoriteit eerder uitgeoefend via afstand, controle en procedurele helderheid. Beide vormen brengen specifieke spanningen en beperkingen met zich mee.

Overkoepelend laat deze studie zien dat gevangeniswerk niet enkel begrepen kan worden in termen van formele taken of beleidsdoelstellingen, maar vooral als een praktijk waarin vakmanschap, identiteit en ruimte voortdurend met elkaar verweven zijn. *Jail craft* verwijst daarbij naar het vermogen van bewaarders om macht, emotie en onzekerheid te hanteren op een manier die zowel veiligheid als menselijke waardigheid waarborgt. Het omvat het inschatten van situaties, het balanceren tussen ingrijpen en terughoudendheid, en het aanvoelen van de affectieve dynamiek van de gevangenisomgeving.

Deze bevindingen benadrukken dat beleidsmatige hervormingen in het gevangeniswezen niet los kunnen worden gezien van de dagelijkse praktijk van eerstelijnswerkers. Wetgeving en organisatie kunnen richting geven, maar het is in de interactie tussen structuur, cultuur en ruimte dat gevangeniswerk daadwerkelijk vorm krijgt. Indien deze dimensies niet in evenwicht worden gebracht, dreigt een uitholling van zowel professioneel vakmanschap als institutionele legitimiteit. De centrale uitdaging voor hedendaagse gevangenissystemen ligt dan ook in het ontwikkelen van kaders die zowel procedurele consistentie als relationele betrokkenheid mogelijk maken, en zo ruimte bieden voor het voortbestaan en de ontwikkeling van *jail craft* als kern van professioneel gevangeniswerk.

In dit verband maakt het onderzoek bovendien duidelijk dat *jail craft* niet louter een individuele competentie is, maar afhankelijk is van toegang tot bepaalde structurele en culturele voorwaarden. Vakmanschap ontstaat en wordt onderhouden binnen sociale netwerken van collega's, door informele kennisoverdracht en gedeelde ervaringen, maar staat tegelijk onder druk door veranderingen zoals personeelstekorten, verhoogde administratieve lasten en de afname van ervaren personeel.

Tot slot toont deze studie aan dat het werk van gevangenisbewaarders niet enkel begrepen kan worden in termen van wat zij doen, maar vooral in termen van hoe zij dit doen binnen specifieke institutionele omstandigheden. *Jail craft* verwijst daarmee naar het vermogen om macht, emotie en onzekerheid zodanig te hanteren dat zowel veiligheid als menselijke waardigheid behouden blijven. Door de dagelijkse praktijken van gevangenisbewaarders centraal te stellen, draagt deze dissertatie bij aan een meer genuanceerd en empirisch onderbouwd begrip van hedendaags gevangeniswerk en de rol van geüniformeerd penitentiair personeel binnen post-autoritaire gevangenissen.

Curriculum Vitae

Lorenz Robert Pardon was born on June 23rd, 1993, in Leuven, Belgium. In 2020, he obtained his bachelor's degree in Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. In 2021, he completed his master's degree in Criminology at the same university. During his studies in 2020 and 2021, Lorenz participated as a voluntary researcher in a collaborative project between the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the National Institute of Criminalistics and Criminology (NICC), focusing on the experiences of detained persons with prison climate in Flemish prisons. Following his graduation, Lorenz started his doctoral research (2021-2025), a joint project between the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Leiden University, examining the concept of 'jail craft' in Belgium and the Netherlands. His dissertation specifically analyses the similarities and differences between uniformed prison staff in their experiences and practices across four prison institutions, two in each country. Currently, Lorenz remains affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel as a voluntary researcher and works as a strategic analyst advisor at the Federal Judicial Police in Belgium, with a focus on financial execution inquiries.

In the range of books published by the Meijers Research Institute and Graduate School of Leiden Law School, Leiden University, the following titles were published in 2025 and 2026

MI-433 S. Vandenbroucke, *Navigating Corporate Responsibility in Global Supply Chains using Codes of Conduct*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-434 B.N. van Ganzen, *Dynamism and Democracy. Essays on the Fiscal Social Contract in a Globalised World* , (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-435 M. Michels, *Meerouderschap en het erfrecht. Een onderzoek naar de erfrechtelijke positie van het kind en zijn ouders in een intentioneel meeroudergezin*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-436 D.K. Jongkind, *Netwerksubsidies. Een onderzoek naar de wijze waarop samenwerking in subsidierelaties binnen het bestuursrecht kan worden vormgegeven*, (diss. Leiden), Deventer: Kluwer 2025, ISBN 978 90 1318 051 0

MI-437 G. Boffi, *Socio-Economic Integration and Social Citizenship of Migrants: Empirical Analyses*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-438 A. Kaviani Johnson, *From concept to application: A critical reflection on child safeguarding from a children's rights perspective*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025, ISBN 978 94 6473 734 9

MI-439 J. Choi, *Criminal Liability of Pilots in Aviation Accident Cases*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025, ISBN 978 94 6473 777 6

MI-440 K. Sharma, *The Assembly of States Parties to the International Criminal Court – A Good Governance Approach,* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-441 B. Budinská, *The European Central Bank's centralised application of national law under the Single Supervisory Mechanism. A rule of law analysis*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-442 H. Bliersbach, *Becoming and Belonging? Lived Experiences of Naturalization and Implementation of Citizenship Law in Germany and Canada*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-443 D.P.L. van Thiel, *Fundamental Labour Standards and the Shift from International to Transnational Labour Law. Countervailing Power in the Globalised World of Work*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025, ISBN 978 94 6473 757 8

MI-444 L.M.J. van Doorn, *From Risks to Public Opinion. How Structural Economic Changes Shape Political Attitudes and Policy Preferences*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-445 D. Koning, *De ventielfunctie van de artikel 12 Sv-procedure. Klachten tegen niet-vervolging in maatschappelijk gevoelige kwesties*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025, ISBN 978 94 6473 796 7

MI-446 A.S. Florescu, *Migration, Abduction and Children's Rights. The relevance of children's rights and the European supranational system to child abduction cases with immigration components,* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-447 C. Smit, *Minderheidskabinetten in Nederland en Denemarken*, (diss. Leiden), Den Haag: Boom juridisch 2025, ISBN 978 94 6212 216 1 (978-94-0011-571-2 ebook)

MI-448 S.J. Lopik, *Klimaatstrafrecht. De rol van het strafrecht binnen het juridische antwoord op klimaatverandering*, (diss. Leiden), Deventer: Kluwer 2025, ISBN 978 90 1318 157 9

MI-449 E. Grosfeld, *Increasing Public Perceived Legitimacy of the European Union Through the Integration of Psychological Insights into Law,* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-450 E. Nave, *Countering online hate speech. How to adequately protect fundamental rights?*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025, ISBN 978 94 6473 832 2

MI-451 J.I. Holtz, *Collective Human Rights as an (Onto)Logical Solution to Climate Change. Reconceptualizing, Applying, and Proceduralizing an Overlooked Category of Human Rights*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025,

MI-452 N.A. Campuzano, *The Regulation of Financial Benchmarks*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-453 C.E. Fenwick, *The Political Economy of Immigration and Welfare State Reform. A collection of comparative political and economic essays on human mobility and social protection* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-454 S.H. Lam, *Navigating Between Empires. The discourses on self-determination in and about Hong Kong* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026

MI-455 R.C.G. Brouwer, *Shakespeare, Renan and Weber. An interdisciplinary study of the violence paradigm and what it means to law and the nation-state* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam Printing 2026, ISBN 978 94 6473 969 5

MI-456 A.M. Smulders, *International Law and the Challenge of Disinformation. A Patchwork of Rights and Obligations* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam Printing 2026

MI-457 R.K. Kemp, *Dynamic Capabilities as Microfoundations for Technological Business Model Innovation in Law Firms. Exploring Drivers and Barriers for Change* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-458 L.G.L. Hartman-Ohnesorge, *Bridging the Sustainability Information Gap: An Assessment of the European Sustainable Finance Framework* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026

MI-459 I.D. Asscher, *Shunning responsibilities and shifting risks. States' responses to the foreign terrorist fighters phenomenon & the limits of public international law*, (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2025

MI-460 H.J. Weijers, *De rechtsdwaling. Een onderzoek naar de plaats en betekenis van de rechtsdwaling en het beginsel dat eenieder wordt geacht het recht te kennen in het Nederlandse recht, in het bijzonder het privaatrecht* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026

MI-461 I. Rossoni, *Manufacturing Vulnerability. Sex Work, Migration, and Trafficking on the Southern Borders of Europe* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026

MI-462 F. Casano, *Anatomy of the EU tax list: A case-study on EU external tax policy* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026, ISBN 978 94 6536 109 3

MI-463 L.R. Pardon, *Jail Craft of Prison Officers in Post-Authoritarian Prisons. A Comparative Research in Belgium and the Netherlands* (diss. Leiden), Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing 2026