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

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## 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; Kauffman 1988; 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 challeng-

ing 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 too 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 (Garrity, 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 iden-

tity 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, reinforc-

ing 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 experiential 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). Therefore 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 posi-

tion 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 therefore 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 car-

ceral 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.