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

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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

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

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

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.

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 docu-

ments above, these elements align with the PO^{NL}' rehabilitative role, but the PO^{BE}'s duties in this regard are less structured and intensive. Unlike PO^{NL}, PO^{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^{BE}s operate as generalists, blending security tasks with incarcerated person engagement and support, but without the focused rehabilitative mandate that characterizes PO^{NL}. Similarly, while PO^{BE}s share security responsibilities with SO^{NL}s, their role places greater emphasis on incarcerated person interaction and support. This positions PO^{BE}s as intermediaries between the purely custodial responsibilities of SO^{NL}s and the dual rehabilitative-security focus of PO^{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."
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> (Prison A, Fieldnotes, Quote PO^{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}."
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> (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 environ-

ment 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."
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> (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^{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^{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^{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.