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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bitterness and psychological toll they describe are hallmarks of how workers in dirty jobs internalize the stigma and adapt to its demands (Garrihy, 2020). Psychological dirty work deals with the internalization of stigma and the mental strategies used to manage the emotional and moral challenges of a stigmatized role. The officers descriptions reflect the psychological cost of performing such work. They note how prolonged exposure to the prison environment alters one's worldview, leading to increased aggressiveness and suspicion, even outside of work. This suggests that psychological dirty work is not just about managing the stigma associated with the job but also about coping with the erosion of personal identity and values over

time, as the cumulative impact of the environment becomes more deeply embedded in one's sense of self (Garrihy, 2021). For prison officers, this includes projecting authority, controlling frustration or fear, and often suppressing empathy or compassion in interactions with incarcerated persons. This labour is amplified when the officer has to manage their emotions not only with prisoners but also with colleagues and in their personal lives. Korczynski (2003) introduced the concept of "communities of coping" in the workplace. Prison officers represent a strong yet nuanced community of coping. Their unique position within society fosters a sense that non-prison officers "just don't get it" and that "only officers understand".

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

5.1 The Collapse of Collective Identity Among Belgian Prison Officers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2 Environmental Relief and Occupational Reframing

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

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

This reflection captures how sensorial deprivations and physical taint (Herrity et al., 2021; Tracy & Scott, 2007) may subject officers in closed prison environments to "atmospheres" that are suffocating and unnatural (Turner & Peters, 2015). The sensory discomfort upon re-entering the natural world suggests that prison officers are not merely located within carceral condi-

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

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

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

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

This experience stands in sharp contrast to that of PO^{BE}s in Prison A and the conditions described by Mears et al. (2023), where staff themselves endure forms of 'captivity' marked by restricted movement and limited autonomy. Here, the PO^{BE} emphasizes a sense of spatial freedom and control, highlighting the ability to step outside for fresh air as a meaningful act

of self-determination. While seemingly minor, this autonomy signals a more humanizing work environment, where the material design of the prison helps to reduce insularity.

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

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

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

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

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

5.3 Navigating the Architecture of Order

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

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

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

Rather than exercising direct control, SO^{NL}s are relegated to a more passive role under the ESRD-system. This shift marks a departure from the traditional custodial model in which officers held visible and direct authority over detained persons (Crawley, 2004a; Liebling, 2000). As that authority becomes more symbolic than enacted, SO^{NL} report feeling increasingly sidelined and redundant in their role. What was previously a position of strategic oversight has become a marginal presence in the prison's operational flow. Importantly, this experience of redundancy must be understood in light of a broader institutional shift: one that reorients the prison's focus

from control to agency for incarcerated persons. While this shift is rooted in contemporary correctional policy, SO^{NL} find themselves unprepared or insufficiently positioned to embody this new orientation. Their professional identity, shaped by practices of spatial control and procedural oversight, stands at odds with the institution's current emphasis on incarcerated persons self-reliance – a shift that has reconfigured prison operations without redefining the SO^{NL}'s role within them. As a result, the erosion of traditional custodial routines destabilizes not only their functional responsibilities but also their affective commitment to the job. This emotional bond – built through consistency, authority, and a sense of competence – is a key aspect of "jail craft". Without stable structures through which to enact their role meaningfully, SO^{NL}s struggle to situate themselves within the evolving logic of the institution. Another SO^{NL} remarked:

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

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

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

The loss of procedural embeddedness is described by several SO^{NL}s as contributing to an erosion of control. In their accounts, increased incarcerated person autonomy of movement under IMD creates uncertainty and operational friction, as established routines, communication flows, and checkpoints are dismantled. From this perspective, the absence of reliable information about incarcerated persons whereabouts undermines situational awareness and, with it, confidence in responding effectively to

emerging situations. These perceptions also shape inter-staff dynamics. In Prison C, SO^{NL}s and PO^{NL}s operate under different expectations: SO^{NL}s tend to view PO^{NL}s as too willing to override regulations, while PO^{NL}s may see SO^{NL}s as inflexible and overly rule-bound. This tension is heightened under IMD, where discretion over movement becomes a site of contestation. For SO^{NL}s, much of their emotional labour is directed toward navigating such interprofessional friction. The following excerpt illustrates how one SO^{NL} frames these dynamics:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4 Institutional Contexts, Emotional Coping, and Officer Solidarity in Dutch Prisons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While coordinated teamwork and emotional regulation allow PO^{NL} to prevent unnecessary escalation, moments of crisis still arise, requiring officers to respond quickly while maintaining control over their own reactions. Physical interventions are sometimes unavoidable, yet officers must continuously assess whether their actions will de-escalate the situation or further inflame tensions. The aftermath of such incidents is just as important as the immediate response – how officers reflect, discuss, and emotionally process these events determines the broader unit climate. The response to Andrés' attempted assault on Igor exemplifies how team coordination and emotional restraint play a role in containing an immediate conflict and ensuring that follow-up actions remain professional and measured. Rather than allowing frustration to dictate decisions, the PO^{NL} make a collective choice to assign neutral mediators and address the underlying tensions between the incarcerated persons. This approach not only prevents further hostilities but also reinforces professional norms that prioritize control through structured responses rather than personal retaliation. However, not

all crisis situations involve direct aggression or conflict between detained persons. Some require officers to manage unpredictable behaviour stemming from intoxication, mental health crises, or self-harm risks – scenarios that demand a different kind of emotional labour. PO^{NL} mainly rely on coordinated teamwork to prevent unnecessary escalation. When conflicts arise, they assess the situation together, distribute roles, and make collective decisions to resolve tensions. Their approach prioritizes structured responses over immediate punitive measures, ensuring conflicts are handled professionally rather than emotionally. Even in moments of physical intervention, the focus remains on maintaining control and preventing further hostilities. Importantly, the aftermath of such incidents is given as much attention as the immediate response. Officers discuss the situation, reflect on their actions, and ensure their handling of the event aligns with professional norms. This process helps maintain a stable unit climate where emotional regulation and debriefing are institutionalized.

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

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

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

5.5 Prison Officer Participation in Promotion and Demotion

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

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

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

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

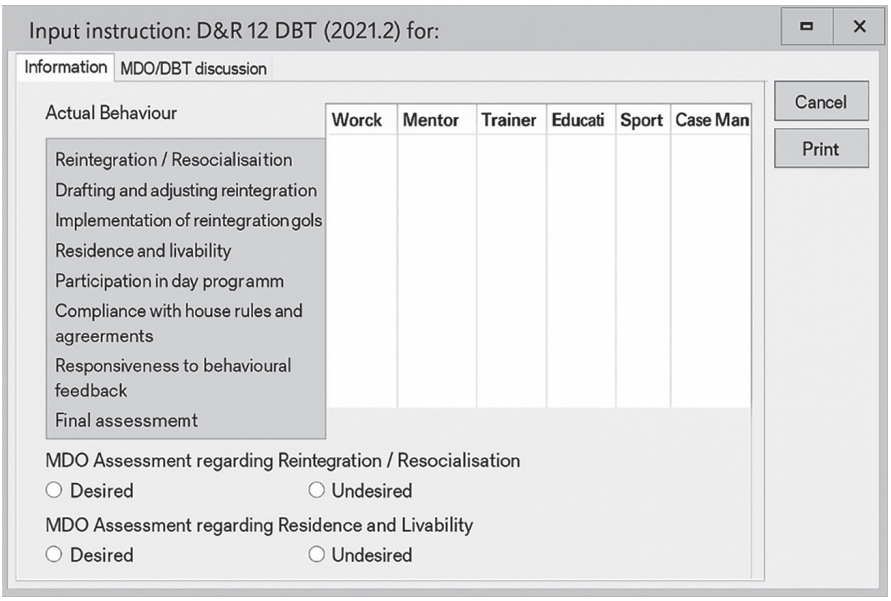

Figure 10. Assessment tab of digital P&D-tool in D&R

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

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

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

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

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

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

The divergence between these two institutional models highlights the tensions faced by prison administrations in balancing security imperatives with rehabilitative ambitions. Although the P&D framework is formally standardized at the policy level, the practical involvement of PO^{NL}'s as mentors in MDO deliberations is shaped by locally contingent factors,

including staffing constraints and managerial priorities. These variations carry significant implications for how principles of behavioural assessment are translated into everyday prison practice.

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

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

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

how attention, monitoring, and behavioural assessments are distributed across the incarcerated population. One officer illustrates this dynamic:

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

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

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

The statement offers a glimpse into the archival nature of carceral power, which '*cannot be erased*' (Crewe, 2011, p.465). Assessments on incarcerated persons are shaped by what has been documented and can be substantiated through formal channels. The process is described as a "cut-and-paste job," underscoring the highly proceduralized and mechanical nature of evaluations. Staff rely on fragmented accounts of conduct, often mediated through written reports compiled by others. In doing so, they depend on a bureaucratically constructed form of assessment and less on an interpersonal one. This temporal concentration echoes Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) concept of the surveillant assemblage. Not only in its fragmented and multi-sourced nature but also in the way individual subjects are intermit-

tently reassembled into evaluable profiles. Surveillance here is punctuated, clustering around institutional rhythms like the upcoming assessment. In this sense, time acts as a structuring force, producing a temporal assemblage of visibility. Officers become more attuned to particular prisoners not because of current risk or conduct, but because of temporal proximity to a formal review.

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

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

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

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

This accumulation of insights into the functioning of the six-week cycle – from anticipatory surveillance and fragmented documentation to temporal fatigue and strategic discretion – illustrates that the P&D system is not simply a behavioural feedback loop for PO^{NL}, an institutionalized mode of governance. Its rhythm recalibrates staff attention and anchors documentation practices. Yet this temporal machinery does not operate in a vacuum. It is animated and interpreted through the broader penal rationality within

which it is embedded. As Liebling et al. (2020, p.52) suggest, Dutch prison staff tend to adopt a *present-focused* approach, prioritizing everyday order and interpersonal stability over long-term behavioural change. This orientation resonates strongly with how the P&D system is enacted on the ground by PO^{NL}: a tool for managing compliance in the here and now. In this context, discretion is not necessarily guided by a fixed moral principle but shaped by pragmatic considerations – whether intervention is worth the effort, whether it risks disrupting unit cohesion, or whether it maintains the working relationship. The six-week cycle, then, functions not merely as an administrative schedule but as a manifestation of a penal logic rooted in present-focused governance.

5.6 Chapter conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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