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

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

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

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

This chapter builds on those insights but shifts analytical gears by introducing *proximity* as a central lens. Following Jefferson and Gaborit (2015), proximity is not merely spatial closeness or frequency of contact, but a relational condition that captures how officers and incarcerated people co-inhabit institutional space. Proximity highlights the ways in which authority, recognition, and emotional labour are structured, challenged, and negotiated. It invites us to see the prison as a relational institution, in which officers and detained persons occupy shared yet asymmetrical social and emotional worlds (Crewe, 2009; Garrihy, 2024). By reframing prison officer practices through proximity, we move beyond essentialist notions of role

to examine how forms of closeness and distance are produced and experienced across different contexts. These differences are often mediated by institutional atmospheres, understood as the affective and sensory climate that shapes how staff and incarcerated persons experience daily life within the prison (Turner & Peters, 2015); by architectural configurations, referring to the physical layout, openness, and visibility within prison spaces that influence interaction and control (Beijersbergen et al., 2016); and by prison ecologies, which encompass the broader interplay between physical environment, institutional culture, and social relations within a given penal setting (Crewe et al., 2014; Tamatea, Day, & Cooke, 2023).The aim here is to understand how officers manage their risks and possibilities within structurally unequal, emotionally charged environments.

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

6.1 Proximity and the Architecture of Separation

6.1.1 Working Alone, Feeling Apart (Belgian Prison A)

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

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

As one officer put it:

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

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

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

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

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

In addition to spatial disconnection, if relational proximity among peers is unmanaged or unsupported, it can be corrosive. PO^{BE}s described a shift from a collective "us versus them" culture to a more individualized "me versus them" orientation (Pardon et al., 2025). In these settings, the traditional "us versus them" culture, erodes into a more individualized "me

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

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

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

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

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

Rather than fostering informal authority or dynamic security, as relational proximity sometimes can, it's absence created structural separation. Not merely shaped by policy or architecture, but also by means of technological communication. Both the internet access for PO^{BE}s and the in-cell telephony provided to incarcerated persons, further diminished the relational dynamics within this prison. While these technologies were generally perceived as enhancing connection to the outside world, they simultaneously weakened

proximity within the carceral space itself (Beyens & Geerts, 2024; Mertens et al., 2021; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). PO^{BE}s acknowledged that the internet allowed them to escape, albeit temporarily, from the emotionally and socially restrictive environment of their unit. As one respondent noted:

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

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

These developments did not merely decrease contact; they altered the texture of proximity itself. Officers were now simultaneously digitally connected to the world beyond the prison and increasingly detached from the people within it. What emerged was a form of technologically mediated

distance, a proximity in which physical presence persisted, but relational engagement was thinned, depersonalized, and rendered intermittent. Leaving PO^{BE}s and incarcerated individuals into a state of parallel existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.2 Proximity and Presence: The Weight of Nearness

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

In contrast to the security-oriented SO^{NL}s and emotionally distanced environment of Prison A, the PO^{BE}s in the Belgian Prison B and the PO^{NL}'s in Dutch Prisons C & D, operate within an institutional setting defined by continuous interpersonal contact. In that regard, proximity, which captures the

spatial, relational and experiential dimensions of prison officer work, can be used to understand how these settings foster interpersonal contact between prison officers (PO^{BE} & PO^{NL}) and incarcerated persons in both countries.

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

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

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

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

This mundane moment is an expression of proximity as a practice: the embodied, affective co-presence through which authority and trust are established and maintained. This exchange reveals the PO^{BE}'s capacity to be open to social interaction without dissolving the professional frame. The

coffee moment is not a break *from* prison work, it *is* prison work, enacted through relational maintenance and affective attentiveness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Dutch Prisons C and D, the accessibility and approachability of PO^{NL}s is not merely a consequence of their physical proximity to incarcerated individuals, but the outcome of a complex interplay between spatial design, team culture, their prison officer role, operational routines, and incarcer-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When staff withdraw into protected spaces, the choreographies of visibility shift, creating openings, real or perceived, for incarcerated persons. Proximity is no longer relational in those cases, rather, the team room becomes an anchor of incidental proximity, a magnet not through affective attachment, but through absence elsewhere. In this light, the room does not simply structure workflows, but actively reshapes the affective geographies of the prison itself (Turner & Peters, 2015; Moran et al., 2016). Underlying these

spatial dynamics is a subtle, but potent, layer of moral judgment. Criticisms of colleagues who linger in the team room invoke discussion on effectiveness. Those who are "always out on the floor", view themselves as embodying the moral centre of the occupational group. Conversely, retreating into the team room too easily becomes a signal of avoidance, disengagement, or even emotional erosion (Garrihy, 2021; Crawley, 2004a).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.3 Conclusion: Proximity, Authority, and Relational Order

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

In Belgian Prison A, proximity was structurally undermined. Officers worked in physical isolation, trapped in a regime of visual and auditory disconnection, where digital technologies offered moments of psychologi-

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

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

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

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

Proximity of prison officers is not a spatial given but an institutional project. It is constructed, policed, and felt, shaped by design, regime, and role, and continuously negotiated in the everyday practices of prison life. In making

proximity a central analytic, this chapter moves beyond dichotomies of care and control, or distance and closeness, to highlight the textures of carceral space as lived and relational. Proximity is not just about who is near or far, it is about how nearness is organized, how distance is maintained, and how relationships are sustained or fractured within the relational architectures of incarceration.