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

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

7.1 RESEARCH AIMS AND DESIGN

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

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

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

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

1. How do structural, cultural, and legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape the construction of prison officers' occupational identities, and how are these perceived by prison officers?
2. How do institutional logics and structural conditions in Belgium and the Netherlands shape local prison officers' practices, and how are these embedded in their day-to-day work?
3. In what ways do spatial configurations in Belgian and Dutch prisons influence prison officers' interaction patterns and everyday work practices?

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

7.2 Craft, Culture, and Context: Reconnecting Findings

7.2.1 Research Question One

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

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

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

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

In *closed regimes and security related post*, by contrast, officers tend to adopt procedural identities rooted in discipline, distance, and strict rule enforcement. These regimes generate a professional habitus based on vigilance and control, which is both learned and reproduced over time. Officers

transferred across regime types experience identity dissonance, as the moral logic of their prior environment clashes with the expectations that come with their new role. This highlights the *institutional stickiness* of occupational socialization and the friction involved in adapting to divergent cultural logics.

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

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

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

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

7.2.2 Research Question Two

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

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

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

Settings characterized by relational proximity to both peers and incarcerated individuals allows for the cultivation of craft knowledge through informal interaction, continuity of presence, and peer learning. Settings where work is fragmented, underregulated, or dominated by security imperatives, officers are structurally denied opportunities to acquire such craft. The introduction of the IMD regime in Dutch Prison C, for instance, decouples SONLs from their previous role in overseeing movement and

decision-making, rendering them functionally redundant and craft-inhibited—a structurally induced condition in which officers are denied access to the spatial, relational, and procedural environments that allow jail craft to emerge and consolidate. Belgian PO^{BE}s in isolated posts experience similar constraints. Officers in these environments develop a sense of detachment from the moral substance of their work and an inability to “learn the job” in any meaningful way.

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

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

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

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

7.2.3 Research Question Three

The third research question centred on the spatial-relational dynamics of prison work, with particular attention to how the physical and architectural configuration of the prison environment shapes officers’ professional orientations and relational practices. Using the concept of proximity as a guiding lens – understood in its spatial, affective, and institutional dimen-

sions – this question explored how carceral space mediates the possibilities for meaningful engagement between staff and with incarcerated individuals. It examined the mechanisms through which design, routine, and policy influence not only patterns of interaction, but also officers' sense of role, presence, and distance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.3 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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

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

While existing literature often idealizes *jail craft* as a tacit and experiential skillset developed through time and interaction (Crewe et al., 2015; Peacock et al., 2017, Garrihy, 2020; 2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024), this study nuances that understanding by introducing the concept of *craft access*. Not all officers are positioned equally to acquire or perform craft. Role stratification, spatial isolation, and institutional policy produce what we term *craft inhibition* – a condition wherein officers are denied the relational and situational exposures necessary to develop a “feel for the game” in relation to incarcerated persons (Bourdieu, 1990). This reframing shifts the analytical focus from craft as an individual accomplishment to craft as a structurally mediated opportunity. In the broader context of post-authoritarian prisons, such inhibition is not inherently dysfunctional. For roles designed around surveillance, rule enforcement, or security-first mandates, minimising discretion may align with institutional priorities. The implications are therefore uneven: for officers whose legitimacy rests on interpersonal engagement and interpretive skill, the loss of craft undermines their professional iden-

tity and weakens their capacity to manage complex interactions; for those in security-centric posts, craft inhibition may simply reinforce the role's intended detachment. The question is not whether craft should be universally accessible, but whether its absence in certain roles inadvertently erodes adaptive capacity or deepens occupational silos to the point of undermining institutional coherence.

7.3.2 Proximity as an institutional condition

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

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

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

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

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

7.3.3 Institutional Stickiness

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

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

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

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

Stickiness also has an emotional dimension. Officers' attachments to certain ways of working – particularly those tied to safety, camaraderie, and certainty – make them reluctant to embrace reforms that threaten these anchors. Even when they intellectually endorse change, affective loyalty to familiar routines and shared understandings of "good work" can sustain

resistance. Institutional inertia is therefore not only bureaucratic but embodied: it resides in the sensorium, in the gestures, language, and moods that define professional belonging.

7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

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

7.4.1 Comparative Lessons: Cohesion and Differentiation

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

A second lesson concerns the divisions that functional differentiation introduces. Differentiation embeds divergent institutional logics – one oriented toward security and control, the other toward care and functional relationships. These logics, each legitimate in its own right, can come into tension when they intersect in the same unit, producing subtle forms of friction or misunderstanding. The risk involves creating prison officer groups that are

neither fully divided nor genuinely integrated, caught between two paradigms of prison work and uncertain about their collective purpose.

7.4.2 Future Research

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

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

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

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

7.4.3 Reflection on the here and now

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

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

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

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

In this way, the classificatory and administrative demands of the reward system do not displace the here-and-now orientation of officers; instead, they layer a future-oriented evaluative logic on top of it. Officers remain present-oriented in how they interpret, prioritise, and act, even as their actions are increasingly pulled into a broader temporal architecture that they must account for. At the same time, the system's long-term perspective does not fundamentally alter the present-focused orientation that characterises officer practice. The immediate functioning of the wing consistently takes precedence over the promotion-demotion system. The operational demands of the day – maintaining order, ensuring safe movement, resolving conflicts, and sustaining a workable unit climate – regularly outweigh the anticipatory logic of behavioural evaluation. This prioritisation is also

visible in the steadily reduced presence of PONLs during MDO meetings. For the two studies Dutch prisons, their presence during the actual meeting had either been reduced to only one PONL or had been eliminated altogether. This appears to reveal a clear hierarchy of commitments in which the here-and-now imperatives of custodial life override the future-oriented ambitions of the reward system, to a degree.

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

7.5 METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

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

A key strength of this design lies in its capacity to capture the contextual specificity of jail craft. The comparative lens allowed the study to trace how occupational roles are experienced depending on organisational culture, staffing structures, and spatial design. At the same time, the interpretive

and inductive nature of the research demanded awareness of my own positionality. The scope of the research naturally positioned me closer to staff than to incarcerated persons. This institutional vantage point shaped the focus of the research: it centres on staff culture, not on incarcerated persons' lived experiences. I recognise that as an institutional blind spot, but also as a deliberate methodological focus. By looking closely at the world of officers, I was able to trace how structural reforms and spatial regimes are translated into daily routines and occupational meanings.

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

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

Despite its contributions, this study has its limitations. It paid less attention to intra-group variations among officers in the dissertation, that could further nuance how jail craft is expressed. Differences between junior and senior staff, variations across contracted versus permanently appointed officers, gendered approaches to conflict management, and distinctions between officers working in specialised units (such as remand, long-stay, or drug-free wings) may all shape how skills are enacted on the ground. The focus on staff perspectives also leaves the incarcerated persons viewpoint only indirectly represented. Finally, the fieldwork was conducted within a specific temporal window, meaning that the results from these institutions are subject to change depending on the developments that may occur within each context. Shifts in staffing levels, the introduction of new security technologies, changes in management teams, alterations to the organisational model (such as the expansion of differentiated staff roles), or new policy directives – ranging from prison population-reduction strategies to revised regimes or strike-related protocols – could all significantly reshape daily practices and staff-prisoner interactions. Consequently, the findings presented here should be read as grounded in the institutional realities of the period in which the fieldwork was carried out, rather than as static char-

acteristics of the prisons themselves. These limitations do not undermine the findings; rather, they clarify their scope and epistemic positioning. The analysis offers a grounded but situated account of prison officer culture, one that reflects both the possibilities and constraints of researching in closed institutions.