



Encountering the C Wing: The Relationship Between Prisoner Self-Governance and “Pains of Imprisonment”

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Abstract

Since Gresham Sykes completed his influential work documenting what he termed the “pains of imprisonment”, criminologists and sociologists have sought to study the prison as an institution and the effects it has on the people who are confined in it. Researchers have also studied prisons in different geopolitical contexts in order to understand the varied effects that diverse types of prison governance may have. Especially important has been understanding the impact on the “pains of imprisonment” of an emerging trend in prison governance, called *prisoner self-governance*, which is essentially the encouraged or mandated participation of prisoners in decision-making, or else a greater degree of prisoner autonomy within the prison. Research has generally shown that the relationship between prisoner self-governance and the “pains of imprisonment” is complicated, suggesting that self-governance may alleviate “pains of imprisonment” while at the same time creating new pains. To better understand this relationship, and especially to understand it from the point of view of prisoners who

undergo such governance regimes first-hand, we conducted ethnographic research in an “open wing” of a Belgian prison over a period of eight months. Our research showed that the freedoms that the “open wing” offers do partially mitigate the “pains of imprisonment” identified by Sykes over 50 years ago. Additionally, our findings highlight *the deprivation of community* as a potential “pain of imprisonment” not listed by Sykes and subsequent prison literature. Finally, our research supports more recent research that has suggested that the freedoms enabled in open prison regimes may cause additional pains – also known as “pains of freedom”.

Introduction

In 1958, Gresham Sykes detailed what he described as the costs or “pains of imprisonment” in his famous study of the New Jersey State Prison. These consequences of incarceration – loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security – have often been cited by researchers and prison reform advocates who argue that prisons are both oppressive and criminogenic, and fall far short of an imagined rehabilitative ideal. Much of the relevant literature indicates that the “pains of imprisonment” are an inherent part of any prison structure and experience. They seem to be, if not the direct purpose, an inevitable consequence of imprisonment.

Despite the undisputed fact that the “pains of imprisonment” exist in some form across prisons, research also shows that the type of prison regime and the governance model it uses make a significant difference. While many countries use imprisonment more retributively, others show a better “moral performance” (Liebling, 2011) and have shifted towards more open prison regimes, in which incarcerated people can participate in the daily decision-making of the facility’s operations – in other words, creating a type of self-governance. This form of self-governance can also be viewed as “legal self-governance” – self-governance that is overtly allowed and even encouraged by the prison administration – and is not to be confused with what has been called “extralegal” prisoner self-governance, such as prison gangs in California, or prisoner self-governance at the San Pedro prison in Bolivia, which operates in the absence of enforced government authority (see Skarbek, 2010, 2012).

Governance of prisoners by prison staff and prisoner self-governance coexist, in both harshly punitive prisons and in prisons that seek to be rehabilitative. Nevertheless, self-governance is more commonly found in open prison regimes, where prisoners have more opportunities to make decisions about their daily routine. There are, in fact, stark differences between “open prisons” and “closed prisons” and the definitions of these concepts vary across countries and in different penal contexts. Some prisons operate using open regimes, in which some freedoms are “permitted” to prisoners by prison authorities, such as the ability to cook for themselves or the ability to move around the prison freely. Conversely, autonomy may manifest in closed regimes as the ways in which incarcerated people exercise individual or collective resistance against prison policies or directives (see Ugelvik, 2014). In line with a Foucauldian governmentality critique (see Garland, 1997; Hudson, 1998), some scholars have taken a more critical approach to prison self-governance, arguing that models of prisoner self-governance implemented by prison administrations may serve as additional mechanisms of control, making prisoners more easily governed, as opposed to self-governing (see Bosworth, 2007; Crewe, 2011a, 2011b; Hannah-Moffat, 2000).

Positioning itself among these critiques, our research examines the ways in which elements of prisoner self-governance and decision-making impact the experience of incarceration, but from the point of view of the incarcerated person. Confinement has become a universal method of state-sanctioned punishment, but it is precisely this element of universality that might serve to obscure the importance of prison ethnography. It could be argued that examining the dynamics of governance in a prison might merely be seeking to understand “the obvious” (Sparks & McNeill, 2009, p. 2), and that “because prisons remain permanently out of focus, invisible at worst and pixelated at best, they are resistant to both academic investigation and emotional investment” (Reiter, 2014, p. 417). But it is precisely the ubiquity of incarceration, as well as the societal tendency to take it for granted, that makes the prison all the more valuable as an object of study – both in terms of the effect on the peo-

ple who live inside it and as an institution that is deeply societally embedded. As conversations and research around prison reform and rehabilitation continue, it is vitally important that the experience of incarceration is understood from the point of view of the prisoner. Our contention is that a passive acceptance of prisons either as a necessary good or a necessary evil may serve to render invisible the experience of the incarcerated person.

Following in the footsteps of researchers who have conducted research on open prisons (Neumann, 2012; Reiter, Sexton & Sumner, 2018; Shamma, 2014, 2018), and using eight months of empirical research gathered at an “open wing” in a Belgian prison, our research aimed to “do theory on a micro scale” (Valverde, 2012, p. 250) by linking the topics of prison self-governance and “pains of imprisonment” to first-hand interviews and observations conducted with the men incarcerated at the prison, as well as with prison staff.

Prison (Self-)Governance and Pains of Imprisonment

Over 50 years ago, Gresham Sykes famously outlined the “pains of imprisonment” in his study of the New Jersey State Prison (Sykes, 1958). While the institution he researched was a maximum-security prison and influenced by the specific culture and policies of the United States, his research has become foundational in criminology and penology. The “pains” inflicted upon the imprisoned by the institution are in some ways shared across prisons and have become “a conceptual toolbox to critique penal institutions and show ways in which incarceration produces harm” (Shamma, 2014, p. 108). Sykes outlined five costs that modern incarceration inflicts upon the imprisoned person: the deprivation of liberty, the deprivation of goods and services, the deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the deprivation of autonomy, and the deprivation of security.

As Shamma has noted, however influential Sykes’s work has been in prison ethnography, his “five imprisonment deprivations do not capture the full scope of prison pain” (2014, p. 108). Building upon Sykes’s work, extensive research has been conducted on the “pains of imprisonment”. For example, researchers have examined the relationship between incarcerated persons and the prison staff and the harmful “mind games” inflicted on incarcerated persons (McDermott & King, 1988). Some have examined the ways in which emerging prison architecture contributes to the “pains of imprisonment” (Hancock & Jewkes, 2011). Others have pointed to additional pains. Crewe, for example, has identified the pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy, the pains of psychological assessment, and what is especially interesting for our research, the pains of self-government, as additional costs (2011a, pp. 513–519). Drawing on ethnographic research in an open Norwegian prison, Shamma (2014, p. 108) has also argued that such regimes can cause “pains of freedom”, which he has studied in terms of phenomena such as confusion, anxiety and boundlessness, ambiguity, relative deprivation, and individual responsibility.

In relation to the concept of self-government in prisons, Crewe has argued that the “burden of control” has fallen increasingly onto the prisoners’ shoulders, ensuring that incarcerated people are self-policing as well as policed, and the individual becomes “the agent of one’s own incarceration” (2011a, p. 519). Using the concept of “soft power” to discuss recent shifts in penal power, Crewe argues that rather than through strict control and rigid hierarchies, “soft power” manifests itself through neo-paternalistic attitudes and an emphasis on responsibility, to “encourage the prisoners to regulate their own behaviour” (Crewe, 2011b, p. 456). Crewe and others have argued that the changes that many countries are making toward more “open” justice frameworks constitute not a true cultural shift, but rather an expression of neoliberal law-and-order penal governing. Bosworth (2007, p. 68) argues that through such regimes of responsabilization, “administrators seek to co-opt prisoners themselves into maintaining order and discipline”. According to Hannah-Moffat (2000, p. 523), the increased focus on the empowerment of incarcerated individuals is not a way to increase prisoner autonomy, but rather a masked attempt to exert further control over the prisoner through responsabilization and a “model of self-change”. The discourse of empowerment has appeal, especially for “its ability to informally and subtly govern marginalized populations in a way that encourages them to participate in their own ref-

ormation, while simultaneously appearing to be a critical alternative” (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, p. 520). But as Hannah-Moffat (2000, p. 529) argues, the main reason that a strategy such as empowerment “can be incorporated by the state is because it does not represent challenge to existing relations of power, in fact it reinforces them”. Neumann (2012, p. 148), who has conducted research in an open prison, has argued that such regimes might perhaps be the “ultimate version of Foucauldian governmentality”.

In their work on prisons, Sparks, Bottoms and Hay (1996), while finding prisons inherently undemocratic with an enforced and strict power dynamic – one set of people policed and confined by another set of people – argue for a more nuanced understanding of prison governance. The authors draw on Sykes’s analysis, stating that the fact of power and control over prisoners is complicated by the daily life of the prison, in which prisoners and staff must work together to keep the prison running. In other words, Sykes argues that though hierarchies exist in the framework of prison governance, the day-to-day realities of power in prison are less clear, and he goes on to say that order is in some ways negotiated through the relationships between staff and prisoners (Sparks et al., 1996, pp. 41–42). The routine of prison life “is inherently fragile, because prisoners are agents who may refuse or resist as well as comply or cooperate” (Sparks et al., 1996, p. 83).

What most of this research seems to point out is the importance of both contextualizing and historicizing the “pains of imprisonment” (Crewe, 2011a, 2011b; Shamma, 2014). It also becomes important in light of these debates to understand what self-governance within prisons means for people inside them. What does the negotiation of order look like when the prison itself offers prisoners opportunities for self-governance or even small measures of freedom and decision-making, and how do measures of self-governance reduce, exacerbate, or transform the “pains of imprisonment”? Sykes himself had cautioned that discussing the “pains of imprisonment” should not imply that each experience of incarceration is felt in the same way, or that each pain is shared equally. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear, from both empirical research and from existing literature, that additional costs are emerging as imprisonment that diverges from traditionally “closed regimes”, such as “open prisons”, open programmes within prisons, or even electronic monitoring, becomes more pervasive; and it is equally clear that these additional costs need to be more fully explored, particularly from the point of view of the incarcerated.

Intrigued by these debates, we welcomed the opportunity to conduct research in a newly established “open wing” in a men’s prison in Belgium. The director of the prison saw it as an opportunity to receive the views of independent researchers, since the wing had never been researched before. Nevertheless, our research was not constructed as an “evaluation” and we had the freedom to frame it as we saw best, both in terms of methodology and in terms of research interests.

Encountering the C Wing

One of us was given complete “freedom” over the course of eight months to access the prison, its staff, and the men imprisoned there, without providing prior notice. Crucially, she was able to move throughout the prison without the accompaniment of a guard, and was given permission to interview and record anyone who agreed to speak with her. During her visits, the researcher had the opportunity to spend significant time with the men who lived there, eating dinner with them on a regular basis, playing games with them, and spending time with them in their cells to talk privately or watch television. She was able to visit the prison chapel for mass, attend poetry and “talking group” sessions in the library, and go to Sunday evening film screenings in the prison theatre.

At the end of the research, we were able to rely for our analysis on 13 full interviews (8 with incarcerated men and 5 with prison staff) and eight months of participatory observations, characterized by multiple and continuous talks and shared activities with the men incarcerated and the staff in the C wing. It is important to mention here that in total 10 men can live inside the C wing, and all of them were part of the research. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a core topic list, which

included, but was not limited to, topics such as self-governance, freedom, social relationships, relationships with prison staff, treatment of prisoners, prisoner decision-making, attitudes towards rules and regulations or the prison and the goals of a prison. We were primarily interested in understanding how an increase in prisoner autonomy can affect the experience of people inside prison, whether they are staff or incarcerated. We attempted to avoid major influences by the literature when collecting data or developing predetermined hypotheses, and therefore by utilizing principles of grounded theory (see Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006) when creating our interview questions and conducting the research, our topic list and interview questions were continually updated. Grounded theory guidelines allowed us to conduct our research in an inductive way that was driven by the experiences of the people observed and interviewed.

While it is not easy to convey the sensorial experience of the C wing, we think it is crucial to describe it in as much detail as possible in order to mediate that experience for the readers. The Mechelen Prison is comprised of three separate wings: the A, the B, and the C wings. The C wing is located away from the A and the B wings, and is comprised of 10 individual cells, five on each side of a relatively small hallway. Moving into one of the C wing cells is achieved by applying to the prison director, who then puts the applicant on a waiting list if he fits the following criteria: a) he must be employed within the prison; b) he must not have had any problems with drugs inside the prison; and c) he must generally exhibit good behaviour and a personality suited to interacting with others. The severity of the crime for which he was accused is not part of these criteria. The hallway in the C wing contains a small table, around which people often sit, talk and eat; an administrative table where attendance is taken and forms are filled in; an old foosball table, whose miniature players are regularly taped back together through innovative means; and a pool table. Inexplicably, there is a large black-and-white photograph of a ketchup bottle on the far wall. Upon entering the wing, there is a small kitchen to the left, and a shower room to the right. Men in the C wing have their own keys to their rooms, and they are allowed freedom of movement from 6:00 AM until 9:00 PM, when they are locked into their rooms by the guards for the night. They are allowed to cook together, eat together, play games, shower when they choose, and they can move within the prison unaccompanied by a guard. They are responsible for getting themselves to work on time, and following a daily schedule without prompting by the guards. The C wing has operated in this way only since May 2017.¹

Mitigating “Pains of Imprisonment”

In our research we found that the pains of imprisonment identified by Sykes (1958), while still relevant to those imprisoned within the open C wing, are mitigated to an extent by the freedoms given to those held within it. The deprivation of liberty, which Sykes described as a “double deprivation” – deprivation of freedom of movement both outside the prison and inside – is not eliminated by the freedoms of the C wing, as those incarcerated there are still not allowed freedom of movement outside the prison, and they are still separated from loved ones; but the deprivation is undeniably lessened through the freedom of movement within the prison that the men of the C wing enjoy. As one of the quotations suggests, and as became apparent from all the interviews, this “little bit of freedom” is often defined by increased autonomy attained through the absence of a guard and the perceived acceleration of time.

We are free to do everything. It’s a little bit different here, because you can feel free, a little bit free. It’s not

¹ The director of Mechelen Prison’s aim for the C wing was to “give more responsibility to the inmates”; he wanted to experiment with a type of open regime after seeing its potential to work in other Belgian prisons. Other prisons in Belgium were experimenting with open regimes and restorative justice, and the director wanted to bring some of that to Mechelen Prison. In an interview with one of the authors, the prison director said that his desire to create this new wing was influenced both by economic reasons – to run the prison with 10% fewer guards, due to federal mandates – and also by his background and interest in education and psychiatry.

just sitting 24 hours behind a door and waiting until someone comes to open it.

To illustrate this “little bit of freedom” with an example, when there is a religious service in the chapel, men in the A and B wings who want to attend must put their names on a pre-existing list, and then, at the time of the service, wait until the guard comes to unlock their cells and escort them. Men in the C wing, however, simply need to wait until the announcement of the service is made on the loudspeaker, and then walk there themselves, unescorted. The findings demonstrate that the ability to walk from their cell without the supervision of a guard to work and to appointments or activities within the prison allows men in the C wing a degree of freedom that others in the A and B wings do not have. The importance of this autonomy to move about the prison unguarded is illustrated in the quotations below.

You do have more power [in the C wing], because you can decide yourself when to go in the shower. You don't have to wait for the chef [literally translated as boss or chief but in this context referring to the guards] to open the door and say that you have five minutes to shower right now.

In the C wing, the guards come less often, they don't come much. They leave us alone here... here you make your own programme, and the day is full.

Besides “being left alone” by the guards, as the quotation hints at, the importance of the acceleration of time was often highlighted, especially in interviews with prisoners who could compare between their experiences in different wings. Waiting seemed to be perceived as less burdensome in the C wing, and this was defined as a sort of freedom from prison, where waiting as “doing time” is a prominent feature of the punishment.

The waiting is not so long in C wing, because your days are flying. The normal punishment – you get your years done, and you're waiting for the day they open the door. We're waiting here too, but it's a waiting with – with freedom.

The second loss identified by Sykes, that of material goods and services, is, according to both guards and C wing men, alleviated somewhat by the privileges of the C wing. Several men in the C wing emphasized this point when discussing the relative freedom from dependence on the guards. If they needed tobacco, or wanted extra food, they pointed out, they didn't need to wait until they could buy it, or wait until they saw a friend in the prison yard who might lend it. They could simply walk outside their cell into the C wing and ask their neighbour.

The open door can do a lot, the open door does a lot. Imagine I don't have tobacco, and I'm in the A wing. I have to ask the guard, or I have to go to the wandeling [designed walking time in the prison schedule] and ask other men and they might give it to me. But now I can just stand up and go to my neighbor and say “can you give me some?” If you need something, you don't have to call a chef [guard], or hit the intercom, or ring for the alarm. I never touch this button [pointing to the alarm intercom system]. My plan is not to touch the button.

Additionally, men in the C wing often articulated that the “best” freedom in the wing was the presence of warm water in the washroom, and the ability to shower whenever they wanted. While the men in the C wing were still dependent on the guards and prison administration for a good deal of goods and services, the freedoms given to them made a significant difference regarding this deprivation.

For Sykes, the loss of autonomy means that imprisoned individuals are governed totally by the prison as an institution, that every part of the imprisoned individual's daily life is determined by prison rules, regulations, and schedules. Describing this as a form of infantilization, he writes that “the frustration of the prisoner's ability to make choices and the frequent refusals to provide an explanation for the regulations and commands descending from the bureaucratic staff involve a profound threat to the prisoner's self-image because they reduce the prisoner to the weak, helpless, dependent status of childhood” (1958, p. 75). This is certainly not the case for men in the C wing: both guards and C wing men noted that in the wing, men are largely responsible for following their own schedules and getting to appointments on time. Indeed, the infantilization of men in the A and B wings was noted several times in the research; every time an individual in the closed wings needed something, they had to ask

a guard for permission. This difference does not, of course, mean that individuals in the C wing were free from bureaucratic prison rules, but rather that these rules governed fewer aspects of their daily lives.

While Sykes's depiction of the loss of heterosexual relationships is outdated (and heteronormative), it is still true that the loss of intimate relationships, intended here both as sexual relationships with anyone outside prison and as non-sexual relationships with other genders, remains a significant deprivation of prison, including in the C wing. Conceivably, this loss might impact on constructions of masculinity (see Ugelvik, 2014). In the C wing, this may be mitigated by the ability to develop strong, non-sexual social bonds with other men in the wing; the stronger the relationships in the wing are, the less dependent the men may be on the guards for services, and the less the men may feel they have to prove traditional masculinity. As one of the men pointed out, for example, crying in front of others in the C wing is more socially acceptable than in the other wings.

When it comes to the loss of security within a prison, and the anxiety that comes from constant fear of harm, our findings demonstrate that rather than increasing the risk of harm from others, the C wing encourages and fosters social bonds, strengthening relationships and reliance on others. One of the most significant advantages of the C wing, as depicted by those incarcerated within it, was the ability to protect oneself mentally from the monotony, loneliness, and emotional hardship of prison. Many men said that the biggest thing to fear in prison is that it could "break you". The C wing, they said, gave them the opportunity to keep busy through social interactions, to distract from the painful reality of separation from loved ones, and from the general hardships of prison life, to "get through" as the quote below illustrates:

Here you can talk. I can say "I have this problem, what do you think about it?" It helps you. It does help, it really does help. And if you stay here together longer than one year or two years, then you have a bond with each other. It helps you get through [prison time].

The C wing clearly offered relief from mental anguish; "staying busy" refers not only to staying occupied physically, always moving, but also mentally and emotionally. Instead of formalized support or mental health services, which many respondents highlighted as severely lacking in the prison, the C wing afforded them the opportunity to avoid mental anguish through the ability to stay busy. In other words, the value of the C wing for those held there was the ability to support each other and themselves by busying themselves with socializing, activities, and work.

Overall, the research suggests that the C wing offers greater liberty and freedom of movement; greater access to goods and services; and, by way of a social community, greater autonomy, security, and depth of relationships. The wing does not, by any means, eliminate the costs of incarceration completely, but rather restructures the daily routine and interactions of the men who live there to such an extent that these costs are not as central to their overall experience as they would be in a closed wing. What seems more important to highlight from our research is that the mitigation of each of the "pains of imprisonment" in the C wing is inextricably intertwined with the increased opportunities for socialization that the C wing offers.

The implications of this argument are significant, since one may posit that for incarcerated people, emphasizing the loss of individual freedom might be less important in decreasing the harms of imprisonment than socialization with others. Or perhaps we may need to argue that individual freedoms may even be meaningless unless they are given in a context in which collective freedoms are also present, such as freedom to engage in a community. Prisons that promote responsabilization and empowerment of prisoners do so individually; relationship-building and institutionalized support, however, are collective. This does not mean, of course, that the importance of "freedom" as a concept can be reduced or distilled to the concept of "socialization"; for example, the freedom of movement afforded to C wing men within the prison also allows them individual freedoms, such as freedom to take a shower at any time they desire. However, it is reasonable to assert that the relationship between mitigation of harms caused by imprisonment and social interactions is noteworthy. Moreover, the relationships and community developed in the C wing gave real protection from the psychological and other hardships

of more closed-regime imprisonment.

Deprivation of Community as an Additional “Pain of Imprisonment”

The importance of community was also visible in the discrepancy between how imprisoned men and prison staff related to freedom within the C wing. The incarcerated men linked freedom more often to social ties, freedom from reliance on the guards, the ability to live within a social community that they created, and to the emotional support and mental escape from negative thoughts that this community often provided. Meanwhile, the prison staff linked freedom more often to responsibility and individual decision-making. This suggests that for the prison administration, responsibility was a more important aspect of the C wing, while for the men incarcerated in the C wing, the social ties, community, and freedom from reliance on the guards were more important. Our research therefore suggests that an important additional “pain of imprisonment” is the *deprivation of community* – that social interactions and relationships within the prison itself are not only discouraged by traditional closed regimes, but that these social ties and the formation of a strong social community can mitigate many other deprivations of incarceration. As suggested by Crewe (2009), the power of social ties seems to make a significant difference in the experience of incarceration. A few quotations from our interviews strongly convey the sense of the importance of the community in the C wing (“*in the C wing, we’re a family*”), both in its own terms but also in terms of mitigation of other deprivations.

What people don’t realize about the C is that it doesn’t matter if the door is closed or open if there’s not a good group. If you don’t like the people, what does it matter if you can go outside your room? Why would you want to? If there’re no good relations in the group, it won’t work. If I don’t have some men to sit around the table and eat with and talk with, I have no reason to leave [the room].

Here [in the C wing], when you’re sad about something, and you go to court, or your family and you are sad, you can talk with people. We are a group; you can talk every day when you are sad, when you are happy, you can be happy with other people. In the A or B wing, you are alone. You are standing alone in prison. And that’s the difference here. You don’t feel alone.

The ability to leave one’s cell door open and socialize with others in the wing was linked again and again to the freedom of emotional release and mental escape. This was the biggest liberty that the men of the C wing pointed to when discussing the different structure of their regime. Communicating with others, a key feature of the C wing, was emphasized as an important tool for keeping a connection to the outside world; preserving the ability to be social was characterized as crucial for surviving the “real” world once someone was released. In other words, the cell becomes someone’s reality when he is there alone; this new enclosed reality eclipses the outside world. On the other hand, when someone is with other people, and they can talk about their daily lives or their personal histories, the connection with the outside world remains strong.

The C wing allowed for stronger social ties between the men in the wing, but also between the men and the guards of the prison. The guards had better, friendlier, and more intimate relationships with the men in the C wing than the men in the other wings. In different wings, guards seem to have a different job description. In the A wing, for example, one guard said the biggest part of the job was “*security: we open the doors, we close the doors*”. By removing the burden of this expected type of security over men in the C wing, thereby giving these men an increased sense of freedom, guards were themselves also free to develop stronger social ties with the C wing men. This difference in job description allowed the guards to talk more freely with the men when they came to the wing, chatting and joking and often smoking a cigarette, as the following quote from a guard illustrates.

It’s more relaxed on both sides, you get to know people. If somebody goes away from the C wing, goes free, then it’s like “hey, good luck!” You don’t say that much to the people [in the A wing], but up there [in the C wing] you have a more special relationship, a closer relationship than with the people [in the A wing] because you have more chance to talk to the people or get to know them.

But instead of a lack of interest in security, as Liebling (2004) has argued, the mixing of guards with prisoners is mandated and encouraged as part of a trend in so-called “dynamic security”. Such relations can be genuine but are simultaneously instrumental, as Crewe (2011b) has argued, in gaining favours and better treatment, and enhancing one’s standing inside the prison. One man who was transferred from the C wing to the A wing as a punishment for breaches in conduct described the difference in treatment, linking it to the higher status in the prison that the C wing men hold. This status, he said, enabled men in the C wing to have stronger social ties with the guards than men in the A or B wings. He characterized the treatment he received in the A wing as infantilization, while in the C wing he felt more equal to the guards:

[In the A wing] we are prisoners, and sometimes I have the feeling that people think we are kids. On Monday, it was very hot outside, inside too, and we asked three or four times – we have glass in our door, so the guards can see us – to open it, because it was hot in the rooms. The first few times, the response was “I don’t know, it’s not very hot”. When we say it’s hot, it’s hot. You must ask four times for something so stupid. And after all, it’s OK, yes, it’s hot. I’m not a child. When we ask something, we need it. I’m not pushing the button for fun, to say “hi, how are you doing today?” In the C wing it’s another system. To the people in the C wing, the guards answer the first time yes. Because it’s the people in the C wing.

In an earlier interview, when he was still in the C wing, the same man said that in the C wing,

the guards talk with us. They mostly know when we have problems outside with family or friends or inside, they talk with us and they know the problem, and that’s important for guards and for us, we can talk with them. We can talk with them as normal people and not as “I’m the boss inside”. In the other wings they open the door, say, five times a day for one minute, and that’s it. Here, when a guard comes, they talk with us. They come into our room, they drink a coffee, they smoke a cigarette and they talk with us.

Our findings also suggest that the experience of punishment itself and the harms of labelling might also be mitigated in open (and more relational) prison regimes.

Sometimes justice [referring to the system] makes people criminals... [In the other wings] they put a stamp on you, they treat you inhumanely. [But in the C wing] ...you feel yourself here, you feel you’re a person and not a prisoner, and not a number or something. We are a person here, we have a name that the guards use to call us, and not a number, like “that’s number one and he’s here and tomorrow he’s gone”. Now they know us, they privately do. They know everything and we know things about them.

When asked if the C wing could theoretically be open to prisoners of any background, a guard said that he thought anyone could succeed there with the appropriate support. The same guard also said, however, that not everyone would be able to “handle” the C wing. In doing so, the guard drew a clear connection between success in the C wing and increased institutional support for prisoners; however, most staff (as well as prisoners) emphasized the lack of institutional support for incarcerated people inside the prison. The prison director himself said that in the C wing, “*you have to do a good selection of the inmates... so that means they have to respect a few rules*”. If they don’t respect these rules, “*they have to leave*”. Thus the research made clear that the C wing could only be useful to those who were already in an emotional and psychological position to govern themselves and regulate their conduct; it could not be used as a general mechanism for rehabilitation.

The obstacles to success for C wing men without support were particularly obvious in an outlier case. In the spring, a man accused of child sexual abuse was transferred to the C wing from the A wing. As soon as he entered the C wing for the first time, it was clear that his presence angered and upset the other men in the wing. In the following weeks and months, he continued to be rejected and ignored by his peers. Although there was no outright cruel behaviour toward him, the men in the C wing never accepted him and indeed rarely spoke to him. After approximately four months, he was transferred back to the A wing. This example painfully illustrates the fragility of the wing’s benefits for its inhabitants. While the community built within the C wing offered support and solidarity not available in more punitive wings, it was limited by its lack of institutional support and investment from guards and other prison staff. Any community or support that existed came from what its incarcerated inhabitants were able to create for themselves and with each other. The C wing was defined by fear of ostracism and re-

jection, so among the men, normative and often oppressive rules of behaviour would be self-enforced. The C wing had no safety net; someone accused of crimes that are often considered taboo inside and outside prison walls could not benefit from the community, which was designed for a “good selection” of incarcerated men in the Mechelen Prison. In the C wing, the prison administration’s aim was to increase the sense of personal responsibility that each man felt; it did not accept accountability for any development of relationships or community within the wing. It can be argued that the C wing created a neoliberal view of both responsibility and community; because relationships and group communication were not fostered by prison staff, men in the C wing were ultimately responsible for their own individual good behaviour under threat of removal from the wing, and also for their own sense of belonging in a communal space.

Beyond “Pains of Imprisonment”: New “Pains of Freedom”

As referenced earlier, Crewe (2011a, 2011b) suggests that the “softening” of penal power associated with open prisons and less overtly harsh punishment has led to additional, subtler “pains of imprisonment”, such as the pains of uncertainty and the pains of self-government. Likewise, in his ethnographic study of a prison in Norway, Shammas (2014) documents the “pains of freedom” associated with open prison governance. Both researchers point to freedom within prison as a double-edged sword: freedom in the context of confinement, in other words, can have unforeseen consequences for those experiencing it. Shammas, for example, connects the concept of freedom in prison governance to five related “pains of freedom”: “(1) confusion; (2) anxiety and boundlessness; (3) ambiguity; (4) relative deprivation; and (5) individual responsibility” (2014, p. 110). This governance, Shammas warns, stems from what Foucault called an ambition to “punish better” – placing the burden of governance onto the prisoner himself, a “punishment whose locus is the affirmation of personal sovereignty” (Shammas, 2018, pp. 111–112). Within this type of governance, the “pursuit of freedom-within-penal-constraint comes to be experienced as frustrating, deceptive, and even dangerous”, because freedom is always juxtaposed by the more restrictive options; there is always a looming threat of less freedom, more confinement (Shammas, 2018, p. 112). In the words of an incarcerated man, “*here [in C wing] is free, but it’s also a very controlled environment, they’re always watching, seeing if something happens*”. In the C wing, the constant threat of removal to the more restrictive wings acted as a method of control separate from guard supervision.

As referenced earlier, Hannah-Moffat’s (2000) research connects neoliberal prison governance and seemingly benign concepts of prisoner “empowerment” with responsabilization and forced prisoner self-governance. Hannah-Moffat states that “empowerment, in penal settings, can be used to justify and legitimate a variety of disciplinary techniques through the language of responsibility” (2000, p. 524). Bosworth later echoes this point, comparing official prison language of individual responsibility and self-governance to a “trope of citizenship” aimed at control, rather than actual empowerment (2007, p. 73). Our research supported these points to an extent. The theme of responsabilization was especially present in both the director’s and the guards’ characterization of success in the C wing. Several times, staff argued that the men in the C wing themselves needed to be responsible for the success of the wing. Individual responsibility was a central theme in one guard’s characterization of the C wing’s functioning. Furthermore, when asked about the success of the C wing, the staff often said that the functioning of the C wing depends on the make-up of the group, and whether or not the people there are “suited” to the regime. In other words, the men in the C wing were themselves responsible for the success of the wing; through the framework of responsabilization, any negative issues in the functioning of the wing became the responsibility of the prisoners, rather than the administration. This again demonstrates the subversion of accountability and measurement of success from the administration to the prisoners themselves, and also relates directly to Bosworth’s (2007) point of prisoner co-optation as governance.

As noted earlier, the men of the C wing are made responsible for their own individual success; remaining in the C wing is dependent on the condition of good behaviour. There is, it seems, an element of

what Marc Schuilenburg and Rik Peeters (2017) have called “gift politics”. The authors argued that “the underlying mechanisms to control and influence behaviour can be best understood as examples of a ‘gift relationship’” and that the gift – in this case, greater freedoms of the C wing – functions “as a generator of surveillance and behavioural control” (Schuilenburg & Peeters, 2017, pp. 564–566). By granting this gift to individuals, and by taking it away individually, the C wing is defined by individual, rather than collective, success. Prisons that encourage responsabilization, individual decision-making, and “empowerment”, as opposed to collective relationship building, may do so because it is easier to control and govern people who think of themselves as individuals competing with each other for freedom and rehabilitation, versus people who think of themselves as a collective whose fate and humanity are bound up in each other (see Bosworth, 2007; Hannah-Moffat, 2000; Rose, 2000).

The prison staff spoke often about the idea of individual decision-making, connecting this idea to transitioning from the prison back to the outside world as a way of “learning responsibility”, which can be illustrated by the following quotations:

I think the C wing, it’s more like outside life than inside. [In the A and B wings] we do everything – we tell you when to go to work, we tell you when to eat, we tell you when to sleep, we tell you when to take a shower. [In the C wing] They can themselves decide that... they have to plan their entire day.

Here [in the C wing] they have to do everything by themselves, they are responsible for waking up in the morning, making their own dinner, being on time for work, and so on. But there are rules here, and they have to follow them. If they don’t follow them, they have to move out.

I think things are better [in the C wing] because they make their own rules. The rest of the prison, it’s always the same: us against you ... Giving responsibility to someone also gives him more pride, because then you can take a decision. It always works, it has two sides. You are responsible for the things you do, you cannot say it’s the fault of the system, and it helps also to work at your faults.

The C wing can be seen as a mechanism for control, using the threat of the other wings as both carrot and stick to discipline and control prisoners, while framing the wing’s function as individual empowerment. Being kicked off the C wing was a persistent and prominent threat. Regarding the process of applying to the C wing, one incarcerated man said:

When you behave, and you’re good for the guards and follow the rules, and you work, then you can maybe go to the C wing. It’s a little bit of a game from the administration too, because you have to get here, so it’s a little bit a way to get people to behave.

One man who was interviewed was removed from the C wing after getting into an argument with another incarcerated man. He expressed frustration with what he felt was an unfair decision, saying that he had been in the prison a long time and had never faced disciplinary action. The consequences of even one behavioural infraction felt disproportionate, and he wanted to be able to defend himself to the administration, and be treated as an adult with reasonable decision-making skills, as the C wing purports to treat people: *“We are adults, I think we must talk with the [director], say what the problem is.”*

The controlling effect of the C wing was also shown by the feeling of competitiveness between those in the A and B wings who were on a waiting list to join the C wing. Many felt that individuals were put there unfairly “ahead” of others. By inciting competition among the general population, the C wing plausibly creates an incentive for men in the A or B wings to speak negatively about their fellow prisoners, rather than support or assist them. This is an additional manifestation of how responsabilizing tactics can not only serve to control behaviour but also divert unhappiness among prisoners away from the administration or staff and toward other prisoners. Understandably, this also created some tension between the men of different wings. One respondent in the C wing noted this with some anguish and guilt, saying that he never told friends in the A or B wings about how beneficial the C wing was for him: *“If I tell them, they might feel bad... I don’t emphasize the difference. I don’t think it’s fair.”*

Conclusion

This research was limited in scope and is not meant to provide an exhaustive understanding of the C wing, the Mechelen Prison, or open prison regimes in Belgium more generally. Rather, it is an exploratory study of the effects of limited freedom in a specific carceral setting. The conclusions that have been drawn here should be seen only as a starting point for more research.

We argued that the C wing does have a mitigating effect on the “pains of imprisonment” and that it makes a strong positive difference in the lives of the men who live there. Overall, the men felt that the C wing had a large impact on their daily experience of incarceration: they felt less alone, freer, and more autonomous. It was also eminently clear that social relationships and community within the prison can be crucial to alleviating some of the harms that prison may inflict, and that this deprivation has been overlooked in prison governance. We also argued, therefore, that the deprivation of community may be a vital cost of incarceration that has yet to be recognized, although the importance of social ties within prison has been researched by many, including Sykes himself. From the point of view of those incarcerated in our research, this was overall the biggest advantage the C wing offered; conversely, isolation and dependence seemed to be the biggest danger that the A and B wings posed. Nevertheless, while social ties in the C wing were comparatively strong and highlighted by all our respondents, they seem to be more of a side effect rather than intentional community building encouraged by prison staff and administrators, who focused instead on individual responsibility.

Finally, our research showed that the C wing may also cause additional pains that are related to the emerging literature surrounding the “pains of freedom”. While the open wing allowed its prisoners greater freedoms, which were genuinely felt and which unequivocally improved the experience of imprisonment, there were drawbacks surrounding the openness. Along with freedom came greater uncertainty, anxiety over the looming threat of being ejected from the wing, and a transfer of accountability from the administration to the prisoner. “Pains of freedom” do not necessarily always come with open regimes, but in this case, the administration gave very little support to people inside or outside the C wing. Only someone deemed suitable for the wing could be considered, and if he became unsuitable in some way according to the prison criteria, or if he did not fit into the community of the wing, the administration did little to support him or build relationships between the men. Indeed, even the architecture of a prison should be examined for its effects on the experience of incarceration; in this case, it may be that the proximity of the more restrictive wings – in the same building – and the ease of a transfer there caused some psychological fear. Overall, the study demonstrates that additional research on the costs of incarceration within open prison settings should be conducted.

Prisons with open regimes should be challenged to support their population and increase the benefits of such regimes, instead of encouraging the right type of “well-behaved prisoner”. A culture of prisoner support must be deeply rooted within the whole prison, and not just particular wings. This more nuanced understanding of open regimes in prison complicates the idea that fewer immediate restrictions results in an overall increase in humane treatment of incarcerated people. As trends in incarceration are evolving toward more open forms of governance, it becomes clear that most are not instituted as mechanisms for creating substantial institutional change. If penal institutions truly wish to “empower” the people incarcerated within them and encourage them to make their own decisions, they must do so by providing a support structure that discourages isolation, stimulates emotional and behavioural growth, and embeds a culture of autonomy throughout the prison, and, perhaps most crucially, allows prisoners to make mistakes rather than using a reward and punishment system that serves to control behaviour and to elicit pseudo-rational consumeristic identities. Finally, a prison ethnography that considers the viewpoint of the incarcerated person and the ways in which he or she negotiates the prison experience is crucial to understanding the institution of a prison.

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