

# 'There are Fourteen Grey Areas': 'Jailing', Professionalism and Legitimacy in Prison Officers' Occupational Cultures

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**Summary:** The occupational cultures in which one is immersed have a profound impact on individual and group occupational identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Occupational cultures are socially constructed patterns of shared thinking, feeling, and behaving, distinctly associated with particular occupations (Manning, 2007; Schein, 2010). The occupational cultures of prison officers provide a lens through which they perceive their challenging and complex working world, and their place in it. This paper provides insight into the nature of occupational cultures in Irish prisons and their interplay with the identities of prison officers, including their attitudes, feelings, habits, and practices. It identifies how these occupational cultures are challenged, perpetuated, and/or reinforced in our prisons. The paper presents some of the key findings from a large-scale study, commencing with the relationship between officers' experiences of solidarity and conformity with high levels of entitativity.<sup>1</sup> This will be applied to account for the conceptualisation of 'jailing', discretion, professionalism and legitimacy in prison officers' occupational cultures. The paper draws on unprecedented access to conduct ethnographic research in four Irish prisons from 2015 to 2017, including 76 interviews with all ranks from prison officer to governor. It is complemented by data from a survey distributed to every prison in the state (n = 544). The analysis of prison officers' occupational cultures and identities provides an in-depth understanding of the experience of prison work and the perception and appropriation of penal policy, while generating possibilities for future research, training, and policy.

**Keywords:** Prisons, prison officers, occupational cultures, identity, penal policy, professionalism, legitimacy.

## Introduction

Cultures provide us with intellectual, emotional, and physical knowledge to make sense of our lives. Prison life is fundamentally framed by prison cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Entitativity is defined as the perception of a group as a pure entity and perceiving of a collective of individuals characterised by unity and coherence (Campbell, 1958).

Thus, in the analysis of prisons, there is an inherent analysis of their cultures. Occupational cultures are intrinsically linked to the experience of working in prison and the practices of running prisons (Liebling *et al.*, 2011). Considerations of power, legitimacy, and professionalism are of paramount importance in penological studies broadly, but specifically those of prison staff (Sparks and Bottoms, 1995). This paper will present an analysis of the prison officers' occupational cultures in which these considerations are shaped and, in turn, shape.

The dearth of prison research in Ireland is reflected in the lack of consistent and sustained research across the criminal justice system (O'Donnell, 2008; O'Mahony, 1993; Rogan, 2011). This is further exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive research on prison officers in Ireland. Within this context, prisons have remained obscured for much of their history. Where there is research, it tends to focus on prisoners (see Lundström-Roche, 1985; McCann James, 2001; Quinlan, 2011). The climate of research in Irish prisons remains challenging but with the completion of recent doctoral projects (Barry, 2017; Roche, 2016; Watters, 2017), there are grounds for cautious optimism about the possibilities for future research in the Irish prison system. The publication of the report in 2015 by the previous Inspector of Prisons (assisted by Coyle) (2015), *Culture and Organisation in the Irish Prison Service*, is a valuable contribution, but its focus is directed to organisational culture more than occupational cultures. The underrepresentation of prison officers in prison research is reflected internationally, despite some groundbreaking studies on prison staff over the preceding decades (Britton, 2003; Crawley, 2004a; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling *et al.*, 2011; Zimmer, 1986).

The practice of prison work is central to prison officers' experience. 'Jailing' is the verb used by officers to describe the 'jail craft' essential to work in prison. In a broader sense, it relates to officers' abilities to navigate their occupational environment and the occupational cultures that shape every aspect of their life inside the prison. The skills, dispositions and tacit knowledge that comprise 'jailing' situate officers' abilities to 'do' their job, accumulate cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and cope with the challenging nature of their work firmly within the purview of their occupational cultures.

The paper commences with a brief description of the study from which these findings are drawn before defining and contextualising occupational culture within it. The paper progresses with an analysis of the concept of 'jailing' as 'practical mastery' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 61) within prison officers' occupational cultures. The concept of entitativity (Campbell, 1958) will be

applied to explore the nature of solidarity and conformity for prison officers in this study. The findings explicate how solidarity and conformity develop and are perpetuated through the combination of three dimensions of entitativity — proximity, provenance, and a shared common fate. Discretion lies at the core of prison work and prison cultures (Crewe, 2011; Klofas, 1986; Liebling, 2000, 2008). It is inexorably linked to the professionalism of officers upon whom the legitimacy of the prison regime and practices therein rests (Carrabine, 2005; Liebling, 2011a; Sparks and Bottoms, 1995). The paper will situate the role of occupational cultures in perceiving professionalism and define the concept of 'compromised legitimacy' emerging from this study.

The insights gained through this study illustrate the potency of their application to concepts such as professionalism and legitimacy through the lens of the occupational cultures within our prisons. This has significant added value in its application to future policy initiatives to identify how they will be interpreted through these cultural lenses, with the associated implications for their likelihood of adoption and implementation. The paper will conclude with recommendations for future research.

## **The study**

The study aimed to gain insight into the lived experience of prison officers in Irish prisons. Their aggregate of 'deep stories' (Hochschild, 2016, p. 135) and shared experiences constitute the occupational cultures within each prison and across the prison estate. The study examined the nature of occupational cultures in Irish prisons and their interplay with the identities of prison officers. It sought to account for the attitudes, feelings, habits, and practices that define these occupational cultures. Central to this was the nuanced ways in which these occupational cultures are challenged, perpetuated, and/or reinforced in Irish prisons.

To achieve this, a comprehensive mixed-methods research design with a strong ethnographic core was employed (Brannen, 2005). The ethnographic approach offers a comprehensive combination of methods with which to accomplish this aim, including participant observation and interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The strength of ethnographic research is its potential to delve deeply into occupational cultures (Brewer, 2000). Put simply, 'it's all a matter of scratching surfaces' (Geertz, 1986, p. 373) so one must aim to hear, see, smell and experience the prison environment to seek to understand it.

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Ethical approval was granted by the Irish Prison Service (IPS) Research Committee and the University College Dublin (UCD) Human Research Ethics Committee. Exploratory in nature, a pilot study was conducted including seven in-depth semi-structured interviews and six surveys. The research rested upon securing unprecedented access through diverse gatekeepers including the IPS Research Office, IPS Research Committee, multiple governors, and facilitation by the Prison Officers' Association over many months. With access secured, the data collection comprised fourteen months of ethnographic research with independence of movement and association throughout four Irish prisons from November 2015 to February 2017. The fieldwork was conducted in the then four prisons comprising the Mountjoy Prison Campus, which at the time comprised two medium-security closed male prisons, a medium-security closed female prison and a low-security semi-open male prison, all for people over 18 years of age. This included 69 semi-structured interviews with participants from all ranks from prison officer to governor.

The aim of conducting ethically and socially responsible research was central to this study. Information sheets and posters with clear accessible language were distributed before the research commenced. The complementary nature of the ethnographic data collection and interviews allowed officers to speak informally and/or seek further information before deciding whether to participate in a recorded interview. Potential participants were assured that participation was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous, while no financial inducements would be offered and there will be no repercussions for non-participation. Additionally, participants had the right to pause, stop and/or withdraw from interviews at any time, and withdraw consent for their contributions to be included thereafter. This, however, did not come to pass at any point.

Informed consent was obtained with all interview participants. Participants were requested to sign two short consent forms, confirming their knowledge, understanding and agreement to these terms. Participants were given one of the consent forms to keep. The audio data were transcribed, and the recordings were deleted upon the study's end. A room was made available to conduct interviews but, as noted by others (see Crawley, 2004a; Liebling *et al.*, 2011; Sloan and Wright, 2015), the constantly changing nature of prison research requires officers to be interviewed when and wherever possible. This resulted in interviews being held in class offices, storerooms, and various other haphazard locations. Concomitantly, the same information was provided to all staff upon first encounter in the ethnographic data collection.

Anonymised descriptors are used, and the names of the participants do not appear in any of the data analysis or publications.

The qualitative data were complemented by survey data gathered from across the prison estate in Ireland. The survey was distributed via paper and online formats to facilitate ease of access for officers in diverse occupational circumstances, with a response rate of 22.8% ( $n = 544$ ). Of the response rate of 22.8% ( $n = 544$ ), 18.4% were female ( $n = 100$ ) and 81.6% were male ( $n = 444$ ). According to IPS (Irish Prison Service, 2016) figures the Mountjoy Campus ratio was F: 28.7% / M: 71.3%, but this is affected by the high percentage of female officers in the female prison. The ratio across the IPS estate was F: 24.4% / M: 75.6%, while the ratio across all prisons minus the female prison in this study was F: 22.3% / M: 77.7%. The age of respondents was collected in predefined age groupings, with the largest grouping, 31.6%, being aged 37–43 ( $n = 172$ ). There were only slightly fewer officers in the age group 44–50 at 30.9% ( $n = 168$ ); 20.2% of respondents were aged 30–36 ( $n = 110$ ), 15.6% were over 50 ( $n = 85$ ), while only 1.7% were aged 23–29 ( $n = 9$ ). The years of service were distributed across the five categories, with 27% having 5–9 years ( $n = 147$ ), 24.8% having 16–20 years ( $n = 135$ ) and 19.5% having 10–15 years ( $n = 106$ ). The categories were completed by the 16.2% of respondents with 26 or more years ( $n = 88$ ) and 12.5% with 21–25 years of service ( $n = 68$ ).

**Table 1:** *Demographics of interview participants (excluding pilot study)<sup>2</sup>*

<i>Study</i>		<i>%</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Gender</i>				
	Male	66.2	45	
	Female	33.8	23	68 <sup>3</sup>
<i>Age</i>				
	23–29	4.4	3	
	30–36	28	19	
	37–43	25	17	
	44–50	23.5	16	
	>50	19.1	13	68

<sup>2</sup> Minor demographic details have been amended to protect the anonymity of participants.

<sup>3</sup> There were 68 individual interview participants but 69 interviews. As is the nature of prison research, this resulted from an interview being interrupted by another officer who subsequently joined the interview with the consent of the original officer. Individual interviews were held separately with each officer at a later date.

<i>Study</i>		<i>%</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Years in Service</i>				
	5–9	35.3	24	
	10–15	26.4	18	
	16–20	19.1	13	
	21–25	7.3	5	
	>25	11.7	8	68
<i>Training</i>				
	HCCC <sup>4</sup>	33.8	23	
	9 weeks	66.2	45	68
<i>Grade</i>				
	Prison Officer	78	53	
	Assistant Chief Officer	11.7	8	
	Chief Officer	5.9	4	
	Governor	4.4	3	68

## Defining occupational cultures in prison

Occupational culture, as defined in this paper, focuses on the cultures that developed and remain rooted in the experiences of workers on the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy. There is a distinction between occupational culture (bottom-up) and organisational culture (top-down). In his work on police, Manning (2007) contends that there is a dialectic of organisational and occupational culture. In the Irish context, this is compounded by the fact that except for two (at the time of the fieldwork), every promoted officer up to Campus Governor commenced their career as a recruit prison officer and rose through the ranks. It is more appropriate to consider occupational cultures rather than a singular occupational culture, as there are multiple subcultural variants within the prisons in this study. Schein (2010, p. 18) defines organisational culture as 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct

<sup>4</sup> The Higher Certificate in Custodial Care (HCCC) was introduced in 2007 as a two-year (four-semester) training programme for recruits, replacing the previously provided nine-week course. It combined academic modules and practical elements.

way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those new problems'. This definition applies to an analysis of the day-to-day context of *being* a prison officer. This sentiment is expressed more succinctly by this officer.

Jail makes you what you are. (Prison Officer, Male, 16–20 years)

The salience of prison officers' occupational cultures was profound in this study but requires analysis to account accurately for the nature of their conscious and unconscious roles in officers' lives. Lombardo (1981) queried the salience of prison officers' occupational cultures and maintained that occupational cultures are significant only in times of extreme danger or threat.

The findings of this study present an occupational group who feel under threat from all sides: from Irish Prison Service Headquarters (IPS HQ),<sup>5</sup> local management, prisoners, the media, and the public. Moreover, the findings support the portrait of prison officers' occupational cultures in existing Irish literature (Barry, 2019; Inspector of Prisons and Coyle, 2015; Watters, 2017) and other jurisdictions in presenting a group who believe that they are undervalued, unappreciated and viewed by the public as 'unintelligent, insensitive and sometimes brutal' (Crawley and Crawley, 2008, p. 134). Prison work, in 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961), is hidden from public view, which, according to officers, leads the public and media to perceive their work as nothing more than the warehousing of society's dregs and deviants.

Officers feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned by these multiple sources. Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that they experience their occupational group and identities as under constant threat, which significantly solidifies their experiences of insularity and social isolation. To account for these, a brief examination of the relationship between the concept of entitativity with solidarity and conformity in prison officers' occupational cultures is revealing.

## Entitativity, solidarity and conformity

Prison officers in this study perceived a powerful sense of in-group identification, which can be accounted for with the concept of 'entitativity' (Campbell, 1958). Entitativity is defined as the perception of a group as a pure and distinct entity (Lickel *et al.*, 2000). This distinct entity is perceived as a collective of individuals

<sup>5</sup> Officers almost exclusively refer to the Headquarters of the Irish Prison Service (the staff there) as 'IPS' or 'Longford' (the geographic location of the IPS HQ offices). This is incredibly insightful in its symbolism, as officers refer to the title and headquarters of their own organisation as something other and separate.

characterised by unity and coherence (Campbell, 1958). The specific nature of this distinct in-group identity is more accurately defined as bound by ties of enforced inadvertent kinship. Membership has a familial quality. Many officers share close relationships with smaller subgroups of their wider occupational group, defined by working group, rank, background, sporting interests and sides of the roster, among others. In this way, the boundaries between the task (occupational) group and intimacy (familial) group are blurred for prison officers due to the nature of their work. Their sense of kinship and loyalty to their occupational group is a potent matrix of bonds that supersedes traditional co-worker relations. Entitativity is further enhanced by the shared social categories such as provenance and pathways into the job. Finally, entitativity is compounded by their 'proximity' (Campbell, 1958). Proximity is manifest by sharing, often intense, prison environments for long shifts, where the threat or actuality of violence is pronounced throughout their careers, mitigated by their resilience and sense of humour.

The solidarity among frontline and/or uniformed occupations has long been established (Gassaway, 2007; Liebling *et al.*, 2011; Loftus, 2012; Rivera, 2014). In this study, examples of officers' collective goodwill and altruism abound. Officers reported common practices such as pooling annual leave to donate to a colleague in need due to a relative's illness, and having fundraisers for colleagues' charitable causes. It is noteworthy that officers in this study highlighted a perceived generational downward shift in levels of officer solidarity. Put another way, more experienced officers asserted that the newer generation of officers exhibited less solidarity towards their occupational group.

At the heart of hostile relations between officers and the IPS HQ is that, according to officers, policy is determined by ill-informed bureaucratic civil servants with no frontline prison experience. Historically, prison governors had high levels of autonomy, regarding the prison as their 'personal fiefdom' (Inspector of Prisons and Coyle, 2015, p. 24), but they are now more subservient to IPS HQ. Correspondingly, officers assert that their expertise and resilience go unrecognised, while their input goes unheeded. Promotions awarded by IPS HQ are characterised by officers as a combination of nepotism, often dynastic, and rewarding 'company men'<sup>6</sup> or 'poachers turned gamekeepers' in prison

<sup>6</sup> Gendered discourse is socially constructed to refer almost always to officers, roles or individuals in the masculine form (except when referring to a specific example including a female officer). An officer will refer to, 'the man on the gate', 'the man that was with me on the landing', 'there was a man posted to A Division' despite the person in question being a female officer. This was equally evident in the discourse of female officers, including in the female prison.



officer argot. The antagonistic relations also permeate those between local management and prison officers. IPS HQ and local management are perceived as combining to undermine officers' power and authority to appease prisoners, while applying inconsistent disciplinary processes.

Officers contend that IPS HQ and local management perceive staff as a 'necessary evil' and persistently threaten staff with disciplinary action. A wry phrase that captures this most aptly is 'they (IPS) spend three years training you and thirty trying to sack you'. The complexity of this relationship increases with the juxtaposition with the equally common assertion by officers that they are 'unsackable' but are usually sanctioned by loss of salary increments. Combined with a 'blame culture', this fosters a perception that their occupational group provides protection against this persecution. This conceptualisation of solidarity is inexorably linked to the undermined legitimacy of IPS HQ and local management. Solidarity is perhaps most important as it provides the basis for the last line of defence in times of crisis and instigates the reaction of the group to come to the aid of their colleague (known as 'the blue monster').

The role of the POA is noteworthy as a polarising voice in this context. A comprehensive discussion of the role of prison officer unions is beyond the scope of this paper but it is reasonable to argue that, like their counterparts in various jurisdictions, the POA in Ireland has consolidated significant power within the prison system (Bennett and Wahidin, 2008; Doob and Gartner, 2011; Inspector of Prisons and Coyle, 2015; Liebling *et al.*, 2011; Page, 2011). Officers are presented with a 'big picture' version of IPS's perceived long-term goals, which are being achieved incrementally with each policy initiative. In this climate, officers are balloted for industrial action several times a year, and the perpetually negative interpretation of policies and practices introduced by the IPS significantly contributes to officers' distinct sense of persecution. The words of the POA President (2018) in his speech to the National Congress in April 2018 dramatically outline their espoused perspective on many policy initiatives emanating from the IPS and its advisors.

In the latest round of prisoner concessions to satisfy the whim of whoever the latest 'forward thinking' group that never had to walk a prison landing but thought long and impressive thoughts about how to 'hug' away the problems of this world. Unfortunately, we don't live in this 'fluffy bunny' world.

The other side of the same cultural coin is the pressure on officers to conform to the norms and values of their occupational cultures. The protection provided by their solidarity is inexorably linked to their defence of the collective from external threats from identified out-groups. The strength of an officer's personality or resilience to resist the pressure of their working environment and occupational groups varies. The expectations to conform are often implicit and can be made explicit in several ways. These include the use of humour to deride officers who do not conform, and the retelling of occupational folk tales about officers who were ostracised from the group. The most prevalent and effective sanction is social isolation ('the silent treatment') including not communicating with the officer, not engaging in shift swaps, and not affording reciprocal flexibility of tasks. This appears low in severity, but it is grindingly effective in coercing conformity.

The social pressure extends to the wider occupational group and requires officers not directly involved to contribute to this ritual isolation. Finally, the omnipresent spectre of further repercussions, including apathetic responses in coming to the aid of that officer in distress and/or physical violence, remains. This is not to say that officers do not possess or exert agency within their occupational lives. Rather, officers negotiate their behaviours within the matrix of culturally acceptable activities. To do so, officers become masters of their occupational world. The scope of this paper does not allow a fuller exploration of these synthesised concepts and their role in the studied occupational cultures. However, this concise elaboration serves as a premise for the analysis that follows.

## **'Jailing'**

Occupational cultures are intrinsically linked to the skills and practices that form what officers refer to as 'jailing'. Bourdieu (1990, p. 61) uses the term 'practical mastery' for persons' unthinking ability to manoeuvre and engage in everyday life with relative ease. The synthesised totality of these dispositions and skills is constituted in prison officers' occupational cultures as 'jailing'. Officers hold their ability to 'jail' in high regard. It incorporates the skills officers acquire to 'do' their work. It shares elements of their sense of professional skills particular to their occupation, but simultaneously unofficial ways of 'doing' prison work that may not align with official policy or espoused expectations. Thus, the novel verb 'jailing' describes a combination of tacit knowledge gained through experience, instinct and 'cultural capital'

(Bourdieu, 1977) accumulated throughout their careers. Bourdieu (1977) differentiated between four forms of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. In prison, there are particular forms of capital or economies of knowledge, power, and networks.

Jailing is a social and occupational cultural construct transmitted through generations. The officer quoted below succinctly expresses the character and relative intangibility of this dynamic.

Look, you've been here, it's a community. It's not — I couldn't give you a handbook and say, 'this is the way we run the prison'. It doesn't work like that. (Prison Officer, Male, 10–15)

A significant portion of officers' work is social in essence. Officers are usually outnumbered by prisoners. They are taught early in their careers that their verbal and social skills are their greatest asset and primary form of defence.

You don't have a baton or a gun, but you have your mouth, and this is your most important weapon. (Prison Officer, Female, 10–15)

In the intensely gendered prison environment, officers' work is performative (Britton, 2003; Crawley, 2004b; Curtis, 2014; de Viggiani, 2012; Evans and Wallace, 2008; Hefner, 2017; Sim, 1994; Sloan, 2016; Zimmer, 1986). Prisons are traditionally environments designed by and for men. Officers' status and cultural capital are inexorably linked to their capacity to meet satisfactorily their occupational culturally constructed expectations of gender. In the context of prison work, 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) is a core feature of jailing in their occupational identities. Social skills remain central despite the gendered conceptualisations of male and female officers conceiving male officers' recourse to physical or violent resolutions to diverse interactions.

You could spend all day everyday fighting in here if you wanted to, but your mouth is your biggest weapon in here. (Prison Officer, Male, 16–20)

Female officers engage in various strategies to adapt to their perceived lack of physical power, including adopting a maternal role, but, as with their male colleagues, their social skills remain their prime resource.

Officers pride themselves on their communication skills. The social skills incorporating situationally appropriate employment of humour, cajoling,

authority, and discretion are valued and perceived as the social lubricant that maintains the smooth running of the prison. Officers put considerable effort into 'knowing your prisoner'. They were extremely proud of their ability to read the atmosphere of the prison, the resilience and fortitude to handle themselves in interactions with prisoners and peers, which are core elements of their jailing expertise. There is a distinct belief in the findings of this study that officers' jailing abilities were learned and honed by their practices on the floor, as shaped by their occupational cultures rather than their official training. Mastering and internalising the psychosocial processes that underpin their occupational cultures is not sufficient. Officers must perform skilled 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) to embody their occupational identity. Put simply, officers strategically seek to influence the perceptions of others by presenting a culturally acceptable identity in their interactions.

Cultures are at once a toolkit from which officers draw to create meaningful practices to achieve their aims, and an internalised lens through which they perceive, think, and feel about their occupational world. Officers do not blindly embody their occupational cultures, but engage with them. In this way, occupational cultures are negotiated, contested and not impervious to change. Officers are reflexive in their approach to their work. They learn their craft and reflect on which strategies work better than others to achieve a specific aim. The aim may vary but it invariably includes the accompanying caveat of being achieved through culturally acceptable means.

### **The 'grey area': discretion**

Discretion remains central to prison work (Crewe *et al.*, 2014; Klofas, 1986). According to officers, the 'grey area' is the domain between official prison rules and 'how things are done', which is fundamentally framed by officers' occupational cultures. The importance of the grey area and the significance afforded to it are particularly pronounced in prison officers' occupational cultures. Officers assert that this is where most decisions lie. It is the predominant analogy offered to account for discretion and the flexibility and/or interpretation of rules in their work. Officers reported that the grey area was introduced and positioned at the core of their occupational role from their earliest days as recruits in training. It characterises their perception of their occupational world and role.

There are 14 grey areas. (Prison Officer, Male, 5–9)

The quote above was recalled by an officer from his training but echoes officers throughout the prisons in this study, including the adaptation of the phrase '50 shades of grey' to '14 shades of grey'.<sup>7</sup> The quote ostensibly seeks to instil in officers that distinct prison fields are 'endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on all the objects and agents which enter it' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). An officer's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) fundamentally shapes and is shaped by these fields. It simultaneously instils in officers a nuanced relationship with and interpretation of prison rules. It heightens recruits' reliance on their occupational cultures as their primary frame of reference and resource informing their work practices. Compounding this, officers often had little to inform their view of their nascent careers beyond depictions in popular culture or superficial information from relatives, friends, or acquaintances.

The following quote is illustrative of the interpretative lens of occupational cultures through which officers evaluate every situation throughout their daily working lives. Interactions with peers and prisoners must be analysed and a course of action chosen that satisfies a range of often diametrically opposing demands to achieve the desired aim. In this case, the aim is the successful return of all prisoners to their cells for the night, despite the protestations and refusal of one prisoner. The officer must consider a multitude of factors, including the likely cause of the refusal which requires 'knowing your prisoner', power relations, the surrounding audience and site of the incident, the available support from peers, the surveillance through cameras, the possible escalation and paperwork associated with that, the mood and desire to finish the shift swiftly. Ultimately the situation is framed by the learned and acceptable norms and values of the prison and the strategies to 'get the job done'. In an occupation where discretion is a core feature of everyday work, this becomes part of 'jailing'.

It's a huge part of the jail operations. Of the character in [this prison] anyway, not sure about the other prisons, but I am sure it's the same. You have to give that fellow [the officer] that bit of power, bit of control and I said to him [the officer], 'Tell the man [the prisoner], he's over here now on B [Division]. This particular guy [the prisoner], tell him you'll put him back onto A1 in the shittiest cell you can find for him.' and they [the prisoners] do respond to that. Now, you're not antagonising the fellow [the prisoner], he's the one acting the eejit here. So, you have to tell him

<sup>7</sup> The number 14 refers to the 14 prisons in Ireland at the time of research.

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[the prisoner], 'If you want to stay here on my landing, play the game.'  
(Prison Officer, Male, > 10)

The quote above further illustrates the role that discretionary decisions play in the constant negotiation of power in the prison environment. This officer leverages the power available to him over the prisoner's accommodation, and all its associated implications, against the power of the prisoner's resistance, while both feel the pressure to maintain their respective statuses in the prison milieu.

This exemplifies the nuanced strategies common in the grey area. Further examples include refusing requests for account credit checks, the arrival of items deposited for prisoners, instigating cell searches, humiliating use of humour and late unlocking of specific cells. Officers make scores of infinitesimal daily decisions that lie within the conceptualisation of the grey area. The grey area is amorphous and can extend beyond the framework of rules within which officers are supposed to operate. It is not always simply exercising their discretion within what the rules can be stretched to permit. This conceptualisation of the grey area within occupational cultures is insightful as the official discretionary powers are revealed as intertwined with unofficial practices by officers.

These negative examples are countered by the apparent positive exercising of discretion. The data in the study are replete with examples of officers operating within the grey area for the benefit of prisoners, such as giving extra time out of their cell, extra time on visits, organising a pouch of tobacco or a shop order.

I usually have four or five half ounces<sup>8</sup> that I keep there, and I give them out to the quiet lads and the cleaners maybe, if they do an exceptionally good job or whatever. Because it keeps them sweet. Again, you have to show that you are human, that you have feelings, and if these guys are having a bad day or whatever, that they feel you can be approachable.  
(Prison Officer, Male, 5–9)

Discretion is exercised across a spectrum of apparently positive or negative motivations and outcomes but their interpretation lies in the nature of power relations in prison officers' occupational cultures (Liebling, 2011a). Through

<sup>8</sup> The ounces referred to by this officer are tobacco. Most prisoners purchase tobacco in pouches of one-ounce weight.

their occupational cultural lens, power is perceived as under constant threat and erosion, leading to the common phrase to describe modern prisons as 'the tail is wagging the dog'.

We gave them [prisoners] everything. And then we'd nothing left to give them, so they're starting to act up again now, that's a huge thing. (Prison Officer, Male, 5–9)

Officers across all the fieldwork sites asserted that they experienced a loss of power and authority to make decisions and that decisions they make are often undermined by superiors. There is a lack of faith in the effectiveness of the disciplinary systems, resulting in prisoners having minor sanctions imposed arbitrarily and often withdrawn before they are fully completed. This illustrates the intertwined interpretation of modernisation and improvements in prison conditions as positive, but also as appeasement that leaves officers with no incentive or power to withdraw privileges. Accounting for the nature of discretion in prison officers' occupational cultures raises profound questions about the nature of legitimacy and professionalism through these lenses and this is where the focus of this paper now shifts.

## **Legitimacy and professionalism**

The moral performance of prisons is inexorably linked to their legitimacy (Liebling, 2004, 2011b). Legitimacy is often problematic and not prioritised in prisons (Carrabine, 2005; Sparks *et al.*, 1996). Officers claim legitimacy in one sense by the authority and power vested in them by the state, but they are keenly aware that their claim of legitimacy requires constant reaffirmation and maintenance through relationships with prisoners and peers. Many officers aim to achieve this in part through consistency and 'being straight' with prisoners, which supports the literature (Crawley, 2004a; Liebling, 2011a). Consistency is highly valued among prisoners, as they prefer an officer who is consistently proactive or inactive, supportive or abusive, rather than inconsistent. It is noteworthy that even inactive and/or abusive officers laid claim to legitimacy through the consistency of their practices, citing the prison idiom, 'Prisoners know where they stand with me'.

Officers' lack of faith and confidence in senior prison management and IPS HQ further complicates this issue. Put another way, even officers with diametrically opposed perspectives on their role share the view that

developments (or lack thereof) in organisational policy and practice undermine the legitimacy of the prison. The three most common manifestations of this, according to officers in this study, are a perceived policy of prisoner appeasement, the contradictory espousal of rehabilitative aims while the resources to support such initiatives are not forthcoming, and corruption and a lack of transparency and perceived bias in relation to promotions. The legitimacy of IPS HQ is thus undermined in many officers' eyes. Accordingly, officers seek to attain and confirm their distinct form of legitimacy through measures constructed within their occupational cultures.

To analyse one manifestation further, the perceived policy of appeasement is manifest in the current approach of the IPS HQ and local management. It is characterised by many officers as merely placating prisoners and, in so doing, contributing to the lack of discipline among prisoners. This primarily relates to the perceived imbalance in traditional power relations between officers and prisoners.

What's the point in having a fella in uniform if you can't tell prisoners what to do? They're service users now and in another 10 years, I wouldn't be surprised if we were asking them what they should do. (Prison Officer, Male, 10–15)

In this context, officers feel justified in employing informal discretionary strategies that seek to preserve their 'legitimate' sense of authority, while redressing the perceived erosion of their power and authority over prisoners. As previously discussed, these informal strategies employed to (re)establish boundaries and coerce compliance are established as 'tricks of the *jailing* trade' within their occupational cultures. These strategies play upon prisoners' vulnerability and relative powerlessness expressed in the following maxim:

They'll need us before we need them. (Prison Officer, Female, 10–15)

These deliberate practices are not perceived as 'de-legitimising' (Sparks and Bottoms, 1995) through the lens of their occupational cultures. Rather they constitute what is defined in this study as 'compromised legitimacy'. The standards and measures of legitimacy espoused in IPS policy and demanded by perceived out-groups (especially oversight bodies and reform-orientated groups) are undermined as they are perceived as uninformed and misguided to the realities of prison life. Therefore, a compromised form of legitimacy



has developed by the officers' culturally endorsed perception that it is necessary to maintain appropriate power relations and their authority over prisoners. Put another way, the synthesised perception of IPS HQ and out-groups' undermined legitimacy and officers' sense of powerlessness and fear of manipulation supersedes that of sustaining practices officially prescribed as legitimate. Simply put, officers establish their own form of culturally appropriated 'compromised legitimacy'.

According to Beetham (1991, p. 11), 'a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs'. This conceptualisation of legitimacy accounts for the appropriated form of 'compromised legitimacy' practised and supported as integral to 'jailing' through prison officers' occupational cultures. Officers define their informally established boundaries as being legitimate among officers and prisoners within their field-specific shared habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Succinctly opined by one officer, 'prisoners know the score' (Prison Officer, Male, 10–15). The maligned interpretation of the nuanced intricacies of 'jailing' in the 'grey area' by out-groups is synthesised in this study with a pronounced sense of persecution in officers' occupational cultures. This serves to support and perpetuate this 'compromised legitimacy' as a more bona fide legitimacy, despite out-groups' criticisms. As the expected and internalised norms and values of officers' occupational cultures are their primary benchmark, this analysis is revealing in accounting for the nature of legitimacy and complexity of prison work practices.

The final element of this analysis is the deeply interwoven conceptualisation of professionalism, which buttresses officers' 'compromised legitimacy'. There is a strong sense among officers that they are very professional in their 'own way', while some are more so than others. In officers' occupational cultures, professionalism is defined in specific valorised ways, while others are disdained. Their professionalism is perceived as manifest in 'getting the job done' and their skilled manner in doing so. The belief that people with no understanding or appreciation of their working environment view their practices and attitudes as 'unprofessional' supports their belief that theirs is the truer conceptualisation of professionalism. It facilitates their undermining of external scrutiny, criticism, and contrary recommendations for change and/or reform. Officers believe that their way of 'getting the job done' is situationally appropriate, while 'politically correct' analyses are perceived as ignorant and misguided.

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We are dealing with people in here who won't respond to, 'please go into your cell sir'. (Prison Officer, Male, 10–15)

For prison officers, the ability to engage cordially and reserve prejudice regarding a prisoner's offence is idealised as a level of professionalism that is central to their work while being misunderstood and unappreciated by society.

The officer in the quote below posits this hypothetical approach to illustrate this point.

You look at some fellas and you know they're doing some horrible stuff and you just get on with it. Not saying it's easy, it's not. Then there are individuals who — it comes to your attention what they've done, and you have to talk to them ... even though you were even feeling that they didn't deserve diddy squat — it's your professionalism as a prison officer makes you do it. Where else would anyone, I'm talking about civilians now, what's the attitude? — you pick a thousand civilians, a random sample and pick a really, really bad individual and tell them all what he did. Then ask of them all a series of 10 or 12 questions about what should happen [to him]. When that happens, and you take your random samples and you do your Red C poll<sup>9</sup> and all that, then people might see how bloody professional prison officers act. (Prison Officer, Male, > 10)

Put simply, this is one of many posited examples of the high levels of professionalism exercised by officers in their interactions and relations with prisoners. Officers contend that it is most pronounced for interactions with those imprisoned for serious, heinous, and/or sexual offences. Professionalism, as viewed through the cultural lens, is evaluated according to whether officers satisfy their cultural expectations of behaviour and are 'getting the job done' while being 'a safe pair of hands' and being able to 'handle' prisoners in the prison environment. Adherence to organisational policies and perceived societal values are subservient in this context.

Legitimacy and professionalism among prison officers are two key penological issues in their own right. The inexorable role of occupational cultures in the conceptualisation of legitimacy and professionalism is profound. Legitimacy and professionalism so conceived are a source of the

<sup>9</sup> Red C is a commonly known polling company frequently employed and published in the media on a range of topics including politics and business (<https://www.redcresearch.ie/latest-polls/>).

meaning, pride and honour that are unavailable through various means endorsed by out-groups.

## Conclusion

The study from which this paper is drawn is the first principally ethnographic study of prison officers in Ireland. The dearth of prison research in Ireland notwithstanding, it represents a valuable contribution to penological research and knowledge in the field. The comprehensive scope of this study brings to light many valuable possibilities for future research. Prescient and feasible research projects developing in this study are analyses of staff–prisoner relations, the experience of prison governors and recruits, and comparative studies of Ireland with other appropriate jurisdictions. Specifically, the upcoming reopening of a dedicated prison for older prisoners is an ideal opportunity to study this unique environment.

This paper illustrated the imperative of rigorous analyses of occupational cultures in accounting for the lived experience and practices of prison officers. The entitativity (Campbell, 1958) of the prison officer in-group underpins the strength and persistence of their occupational cultures. Their conceptualisation of solidarity is a source of protection, camaraderie, and status. Concomitantly, belonging to this in-group is perceived as a source of taint so the kinship experienced by officers is experienced as binding while coercing conformity. Occupational cultures in prisons provide internalised matrices of meaning that profoundly shape officers' practices and sense of self. For officers, being masters of their trade is an immense source of pride. This is represented by the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital specific to 'jailing'. Officers' navigation of the discretionary terrain of the 'grey area' is a compelling illustration of the role of occupational cultures.

Occupational cultures appropriate the fundamental principles of penality. Prison officers' everyday interactions with prisoners and peers constitute the frontline of prison legitimacy. The findings of this study identify the form of 'compromised legitimacy' that aligns closely with the norms, values and frameworks of officers' occupational cultures. Drawing on Beetham's (1991, p. 11) work, in prison officers' occupational cultures, legitimacy can be defined as 'what can be justified in terms of their beliefs'. The conceptualisation of professionalism is interwoven with that of legitimacy in officers' working cultures. Officers' thoughts, feelings and behaviours viewed through the cultural lenses are evaluated according to whether officers satisfy their

cultural expectations. In this context, adherence to organisational policies, procedures and the perceived values of out-groups are subservient.

The findings from this pioneering mixed-method research in the Irish prison estate bring the implications for penal policy and procedures into sharp relief. Extensive access to the experiences, views and practices of prison staff has uncovered the potent 'occupational cultural lenses' through which policy and related initiatives are viewed. The analyses presented provide a novel opportunity to understand and engage with these multi-faceted lenses, enabling a more nuanced and informed approach to the design and implementation of prospective policies. Essentially their adoption or appropriation into practice rests upon and is mediated through the occupational cultures into which they are introduced. Simply put, to understand the cultures of prisons is to understand prisons.

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