



The shallow end: Understanding the prisoner experience in Iceland's open prisons

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Prisoners often talk about their prison experience using spatial metaphors such as weight and depth. Imprisonment is frequently described as 'deep', with prisoners reporting feeling 'submerged' or 'buried alive'. But what about its opposite? Can we consider a prison experience that not only lacks these experiential qualities but could in fact be felt and described as 'shallow'? What characteristics would such a shallow prison experience have? In order to investigate this I spent time in Iceland's two open prisons. Both are very small with about 20 prisoners, run with few staff, set in rural, scenic settings and lack most of the features typically associated with imprisonment. In these prisons, I found that in essence, shallowness is both sensorily and interactively experienced. These shallow prisons allow for a range of sensory experiences of which prisoners are typically deprived, and for interactivity in the sense of the outside world permeating the prison in a range of ways. I, therefore, conclude that shallowness comes with its own positive characteristics so that it is more than the absence of depth. In addition, such arrangements are likely to reduce the pains associated with imprisonment considerably.

Keywords

Iceland prisons, open prisons, prison ethnography, Nordic penal exceptionalism

Introduction

Most prison experiences are characterised by depth. This may be expressed by prisoners in various ways. Prisoners frequently complain about feeling 'underground' or say that they feel 'in storage' or 'locked away in a box'. They may say that the outside world feels remote to them, out of reach, and

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therefore losing some of its relevance. Deep imprisonment is now a well-theorised concept (Downes, 1988; King and McDermott, 1995; Crewe, 2015, 2021) with depth summarised by Crewe (2021) as ‘the degree of control, isolation and difference from the outside world’ (Crewe, 2021: 336). However, its opposite, ‘shallowness’ remains relatively unexplored. Indeed, in 2015, Crewe alluded to the need to study ‘shallowness’. He said: ‘*Similar questions should be asked in the shallow end of a prison system: exactly how ‘open’, how porous, and how congruent with community life are these establishments*’ (Crewe, 2015: 59). I will argue that Iceland’s open prisons represent this shallow end, the thematic opposite to deep imprisonment. Characterised by scenic settings, cordial staff–prisoner relations and a good deal of free movement, they represent a setting for a prisoner experience that is in essence, shallow. This article seeks to explore what this shallow imprisonment looks and feels like. In doing so this article makes a contribution to penology by showcasing two relatively unknown prisons at the shallow end of the prison spectrum and by identifying some of the characteristics of these shallow prisons and the experiences associated with spending time in such a prison.

The article is structured as follows. First, it reviews the literature on deep and shallow imprisonment to situate the work described in this article within this body of knowledge, in particular in relation to open prisons. I will then describe the immersive research method that formed the basis for this article, including the research setting, which is Iceland’s only two open prisons, Kviabryggja prison in the West and Sogn prison in the South of Iceland. Then I will discuss their material conditions in order to identify features of these prisons that we can describe as shallow. Subsequently, I will analyse the prisoner experience as relayed to me during two periods of immersive fieldwork in both open prisons. Finally, I conclude on the key aspects that characterise shallow imprisonment in these two open prisons and more widely.

The rise and lure of open prisons

You would expect to find ‘shallowness’, particularly in open prisons. Open prisons are, in a way, a contradiction in terms of linking ‘openness’ to establishments that are by definition, closed. Prisons are meant to be closed, you could say, as they keep people detained against their will so that ‘open’ prisons challenge the very essence of imprisonment. At the same time, the appeal of open prisons is obvious. They offer a possible solution to the conundrum that prisons are in essence self-defeating: that you cannot prepare a prisoner successfully for a return to society whilst at the same time depriving them of all meaningful ties to that society. Open prisons therefore, in theory, could be a penal sweet spot where the individual is removed from society, and continues to experience some of the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958) but is not hermetically sealed away from the outside world. Instead, the prisoner would remain sufficiently connected to society to be able to fit back into it after the completion of their sentence.

The idea of open prisons seems to have gained traction in the 1930s (Fransen, 2017). In the aftermath of World War II, open prisons emerged in a variety of locations, not least Scandinavia, the UK and the US. Fransen (2017) emphasised that open prisons in Denmark were inspired by practices in the United States and Sweden. Trailblazer in Denmark was Kragshovede prison in the very North of Jutland. It started operating more like a camp than a prison soon after World War II. It still operates today. Similarly, Scharff Smith described Jyderup prison in Zealand in Denmark as another example of a prison with little in the way of security features in which it is easier to maintain contact with the outside world and where there is generous outside green space (Scharff Smith, 2012). By the 1950s, there were seven open prisons in Denmark making it a main form of

imprisonment. Scharff Smith argued that in Denmark the rise of open prisons was in fact accidental to the end of World War II with large numbers of people detained for crimes like Nazi collaboration. When these numbers again reduced it was realised that some prisons could actually be run with very little security and that led to the practice of open prisons becoming more firmly established (Scharff Smith, 2012). Likewise, Shammas mentioned the importance of the 1958 Prison Act for the establishment or mainstreaming of Norway's open prisons (Shammas, 2017) highlighting the 1950s as an important era for open prisons in this country too.

America's iconic open prison Chino, the California Institute for Men opened in 1941 and was headed by penologist Kenyon Scudder (Scudder, 1952, 1954). Interestingly, he sought to establish a distinct penal culture by avoiding appointing staff who had worked in other prisons so as to not import practices and cultures from the regular prison system. Prisoners were quite possibly hand-picked too, with many having had college-level education. In Chino's early days, a high wall was not built and cell doors were usually left open. But over time the establishment morphed into the US mainstream with many of its early distinctive features lost (Nagisa Keehn and Walters, 2019). But in its establishment, it was clearly meant to be a 'different' prison in which conditions would be more conducive to rehabilitation.

Open prisons became part of the penal landscape in the UK in the 1940s and 1950s (Fox, 1948, see also Roper, 1950). Leitch (1951) explained that Leyhill in Gloucestershire became the first open prison in England in July 1946, after a trial of similar conditions at New Hall near Wakefield in the 1930s. Somewhat earlier, Elkin (1947) described conditions in Wakefield Camp as he called it, during the war years as: *'they slept in unlocked dormitories and their movements by day were not restrained by so much as a strand of wire'* (p. 105) and *'a perfectly open borstal'* (Elkin: 105).

In summary, open prisons emerged as something different in the penal landscape, and they seem to have done so around the same time in various countries including the UK and the US which makes it unclear how the concept of open prisons actually travelled, or even how or where it originated first. The definitive story of the birth of open prisons, in Nordic countries and elsewhere, is certainly yet to be written (Fransen, 2017).

Literature review: Deep and shallow imprisonment

The term 'depth' to describe an experiential essence of imprisonment is now well established. To start, it was David Downes (1988) who compared the prison experience in England and Wales with the Netherlands. He used the concept of 'depth' to structure that comparison. Although he acknowledged that he was not the first to use the term, he was the first to apply it in detail as an analytical concept to denote how imprisonment can be experienced. Having interviewed UK prisoners in Dutch prisons and Dutch prisoners in UK prisons, he separated out *depth* of imprisonment from *length* of sentence. Downes understood depth in terms of the *'openness of the prison to the outside world'* (Downes, 1992: 201). In addition, Downes argued that depth refers to the degree to which imprisonment is experienced as a *'damaging and repressive phenomenon'* (Downes, 1988: 166).

On both accounts, he found that imprisonment in The Netherlands was less deep than imprisonment in the UK. This lesser depth found expression in a variety of ways including the overall quality of life, the regime and visiting arrangements. To most prisoners, this was clearly a positive. Prison in the Netherlands was less of an assault on the self and less of a 'psychological invasion' than imprisonment in the UK. Downes (1988) summarised this in this fashion: *'In Dutch prisons the rupture is not so marked, the passage of time less prolonged, the sense of social distance less*

acute, and the problems of psychological survival less chronic' (Downes, 1988: 179). However, the only time Downes explicitly referred to 'shallow' is in the concluding comments where he said 'the depth of imprisonment in The Netherlands is markedly shallower than that in Britain' (Downes, 1988: 188). He did not detail or analyse shallowness in its own right.

In their analysis of six British prisons, King and McDermott (1995) refer to 'depth' as the extent to which it is embedded into the security and control systems of imprisonment. Although they acknowledge Downes' characterisation of depth, they noticed an absence of security in his description and they mention that depth of imprisonment experience is to a large extent determined by the assigned security level of the prisoner, and hence the category of prison in which they are placed. It does indeed seem obvious that depth is primarily associated with highly secure conditions. However, 'depth' is not perfectly aligned with security level either as prisoners can be 'deep in' whilst experiencing relatively loose conditions. In passing, King and McDermott mention the possibility of being in shallow conditions, but this did not feature much in their data: *'Although the notion of deep end custody implies there is also a shallow end, prisoners in the lower security prisons were less likely to use that imagery'* (King and McDermott, 1995: 89).

In a recent piece, Crewe (2021) provided further texture to the notion of deep imprisonment as he listed a number of facets associated with it. These included high-security conditions (echoing King and McDermott, 1995); a lack of choice; lack of freedom; and the alien nature of the prison time table. It also included the *'inability to engage in mundane activities'* (p.8); losing track of technology; being in the middle of nowhere; and a temporal dimension of depth associated with long sentences.

On the other end of the prison category spectrum, Shammaas did extensive fieldwork in a low-security prison in Norway that he called Prison Island (Shammaas, 2012, 2014). He highlighted its seemingly highly shallow conditions: *'lower-security with limited outer-perimeter control, a more trusting attitude toward inmates among staff, and greater opportunities for autonomy, freedom of movement and leave to outside society for inmates than more typical prisons'* (Shammaas, 2014: 104). He focused on contradictions in how prisoners experience such benign conditions. He called this 'the pains of freedom', a twist to Sykes' well-known 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958). He emphasised the ambiguities involved in how prisoners experience their prison environment. This prison offers a sense of freedom, but without offering freedom itself, a foretaste, as Shammaas calls it (Shammaas, 2014: 112). He also described how the transition from closed to open conditions can be profoundly disorientating, as found in the arrival stories that prisoners told him. Prisoners were suggested to go for a walk, by themselves, while paperwork got sorted out. For some, this was a strange and unsettling experience. This emphasises that prisoners do not simply enjoy shallow conditions and suffer in deep conditions. It is more differentiated and textured than that.

Ugelvik and Damsa (2018) researched experiences in a prison in Norway designated for foreign nationals. They describe this prison, at least its low-security section, as quite shallow. They mention the lack of a prison wall (in the low secure section of the prison), and generous leave arrangements such as the ability to visit the public library in the local town. However, while the prison may be judged to be 'shallow' in terms of these material conditions and operational practices, prisoners still felt considerable depth in their prison experience. Ugelvik and Damsa, therefore, introduced a geographic dimension to depth. They said: *'We [...] wish to suggest a difference between 'depth' as the distance from freedom and 'depth' as the distance from life. To many prisoners, the relative shallowness of the low-security wing at Kongsvinger did not mean that they did not feel captured deep beneath the surface represented by the life of families and loved ones far*

away' (Ugelvik and Damsa, 2018: 1034). This added dimension is relevant to the current study in Iceland's open prisons where, during my fieldwork, 42% of prisoners were foreign nationals. It also confirms the idea that even in shallow conditions imprisonment can still be felt as deep. This is why a separate discussion on the material conditions that produce shallowness is merited in addition to an analysis as to whether prisoners actually experienced these prisons as shallow.

In the UK, a recent auto-ethnographic account (Micklethwaite and Earle, 2021) considered the transition from closed to open conditions in the UK in more depth. Here, the transition to open conditions was not straightforward either, as it was narrated: '*My adaptations to the closed prison estate rendered me anxious, unsure and ineffective*' (Micklethwaite and Earle, 2021: 543). The article reported feelings of nervousness and hypervigilance as it took the person a good deal of time to adjust to the new conditions. As a consequence, he became only more aware of his own prisonization as a consequence of spending years in closed conditions where a prisoner's agency is rendered non-existent: '*The simple notion of doing something for myself, spontaneously, without seeking permission, brought home to me that I was not used to operating without clearly demarcated behavioural boundaries and explicit permissions as to what I could or could not do*'. As Shammas (2014) also found, the transition from closed to open conditions can be fraught, complex and profoundly disorientating. However, where prisoner accounts in Shammas' work mainly focused on the surprising differences between open and closed conditions, Micklethwaite and Earle (2021) emphasised that the damaging effect of closed conditions run the risk of rendering prisoners ill-prepared, or even unable to cope, with what is required of them in open conditions.

It is fair to say that we still know relatively little about life in open prisons although the work discussed here by Shammas (2014), Ugelvika and Damsa (2018) and also by Micklethwaite and Earle (2021) do make important contributions, as does the historical overview by Fransen (2017) on open prisons in Scandinavia. Most recently, Mjåland et al. (2021), as part of their comparison of life in open prisons in Norway and the UK found that the pains in open prisons, are similar to those in closed prisons, but that the intensity or extent of these pains is reported as lesser in open prisons. This state of affairs prompted the research reported here. I chose to set it in open prisons, to add to this knowledge base and to situate the research in prisons that were most likely to shed light on conditions that to any observer would initially appear as very shallow indeed, Iceland's open prisons.

Method

For this research, I stayed in Iceland's two open prisons assuming the role of 'quasi-prisoner'. The preparations to enable this study to take place took at least two years and involved a good deal of relationship-building with prison officials. This included the Prison Authorities, prison governors and others as well as prison visits to both open prisons and also all other prisons in Iceland for background information (there were five in total). I gained permission from the prison authorities in Iceland, and the research was also lodged at the Icelandic Data Protection Authority (Persónuvernd). The research received favourable ethical opinion from a University ethics committee. The ethics application covered issues such as researching in small coercive environments and the nature of informed consent and voluntariness in such settings (Hammersley, 2015), as well as issues of anonymity and confidentiality (Sloan and Wright, 2015). Issues such as positioning were also considered and discussed (Liebling, 2001). Participants read an information sheet (in English or Icelandic), did sign a consent form and were told that they could withdraw at any time as long as

it was during my fieldwork. Prior to the research the prison bureau provided me with anonymised aggregate demographic data on the prison population. This included their offences, length of sentence, age, gender as well as nationality.

For the actual fieldwork, I travelled to Iceland to stay in each prison for the duration of a week; it was agreed that I was assigned a room, and that I undertake as far as possible the daily routine of prisoners. Prisoners had been informed of my stay in advance via posters in communal areas, with information in both English and Icelandic. During my two stays, I had communal meals and engaged in education. I also took part in informal gatherings such as to watch football on TV or play games. I spent time with both staff and prisoners, both individually and in small group situations. I observed and took part in interactions between staff and prisoners, prisoners among themselves, staff among themselves and also observed practice during visits. In addition, I interviewed everyone who was prepared to speak with me. The number of interviews completed totalled 38. In essence, these semi-structured interviews commenced with the question of what is it like to be or to work in this prison, and the conversation flowed from there. In addition, I had many informal conversations varying from chats during dinner, brief encounters in communal areas to in-depth conversations about a range of subjects. I believe I succeeded in speaking to anyone who was prepared to speak with me, and this included both staff and prisoners. On the occasion where required fellow prisoners served as impromptu translators.

This method allowed me to come to terms with the patterns and texture of daily life in both prisons. It allowed me to come to understand both the occupational culture within the staff group and cultures within groups or cliques (Crewe et al., 2014) of prisoners. But it also allowed me to get a feel for the prison more broadly. This included a sensory component encompassing sights, sounds, smells and the daily patterning of these sensory experiences. Importantly, it also covered evenings, nighttimes and early mornings which are times of day often out of bounds for prison researchers. That also helped as far as feeling the daily patterns and textures of the prison (Crewe, 2021) is concerned.

The research setting: Iceland's two open prisons

In Iceland, open prisons have existed at least since the 1950s but have received very little scholarly attention (however, see Baldursson (2000) and Gunnlaugsson and Galliher (2000), Pakes and Gunnlaugsson (2018) and Gunnlaugsson (2021) for more general overviews of crime and justice in Iceland). Currently, about 25% of all prisoners in Iceland are held in open conditions in one of two open prisons. These are Kviábryggja prison in the West and Sogn prison in the South. As both prisons are relatively little known it is appropriate to set the stage here by introducing them in detail.

Both open prisons are very small, catering for about 20 prisoners each and run by a small number of staff. A limited number of communal spaces are available such as a kitchen, dining room, TV or games room, a small gym and some outbuildings such as workshops. At both prisons, there is generous outside space. Both prisons were not purpose-built. Both have single-room occupancy with rooms in Sogn substantially larger than in Kviábryggja. The term 'room' is appropriate because of the complete absence of typical cell features. Prisoners have their own keys, and there is nothing in the rooms that remind the occupant of a typical cell in a closed prison. The rooms are not ensuite. Prisoners use communal showers and wash basins and toilets, which I never saw in any other state than pristine cleanliness.

Although both prisons are quite similar in many respects there are some differences too, not least in terms of physical appearance. Sogn has a build that, to a degree, might be recognised as a prison design (although its former function was in fact that of a sanatorium). Kviábryggja prison simply does not, with its appearance revealing its previous status as a farm. Unlike Kviábryggja, Sogn prison has a formal reception area, an area where bags can be searched and spacious staff quarters. In Kviábryggja, staff quarters are cramped, offering little or no privacy for staff. The first part of the building is a smoking room behind which there is a small hallway from which you can enter the staff room, the corridor along which most prisoners' rooms are, or, with a few steps up, the dining area. It in no way is reminiscent of a prison layout. Many other typical prison features are also lacking such as visiting areas, search facilities or alarm strips.

In remote Kviábryggja prison, the notion of security is almost ridiculed: whilst there is a cattle grid to keep sheep on the premises there is virtually nothing to keep prisoners in or unwanted visitors out. Visitors are likely to be greeted by a mix of staff and prisoners who are smoking and socialising in the smoking room and most visitors would immediately be prepared a meal. The prison is quiet and first impressions are of friendliness and conviviality. Sogn, closer to urban areas and quite close to Iceland's two high-security prisons, is more likely to hold those on a longer sentence. Unlike Kviábryggja, it does have some security features like a formal vehicle barrier, as well as a more formal reception area. But similarly, prisoners move about, go to the gym, play games and go about their daily business at their own accord. This place is somewhat less convivial as the staff quarters are more extensive and more secluded from prisoner areas. But to a good degree, the impression of Kviábryggja is replicated here. Both prisons come across as friendly, safe places where you get good food and a good night's sleep.

A culture of egalitarianism where no one is supposed to be superior to anyone else seems in place, as also documented by Mjåland and Laursen (2021) in Norwegian prisons, who referred to this as 'horizontal harmony'. Prisoners and staff refer to each other by first name and there is an institutional culture where everyone greets everyone and where, superficially at least, friendliness is the norm. In other words, first impressions very much confirm Nordic exceptionalism (Pakes and Gunnlaugsson, 2018, Pakes, 2020, Pratt, 2008a, 2008b, Pratt and Eriksson, 2014), still bearing in mind critiques of the thesis by, among others Ugelvik and Dullum (2012), Barker (2013), and Scharff Smith and Ugelvik (2017).

Nordic penal exceptionalism is characterised by low rates of imprisonment and relatively benign prison conditions. Its ethos is one of 'normality' which means to have life in prison be as normal as possible (Pratt and Eriksson, 2011, 2014). With that it often meant that, where possible, experiences in the prison should mimic or resemble those in the community. In this way, it seeks to minimise the experiential, including the sensory, contrasts between the prison and the outside world. Iceland's prisons subscribe to this normality, or normalisation thesis to a good degree, certainly in terms of good material conditions, a lack of overcrowding, a good degree of free movement and also in cordial staff-prisoner relations that are not dominated by considerations of personal safety and risk (Pakes, 2020). On the other hand, prison officers in Iceland receive very little training and there is relatively little on offer in terms of specialist provision or opportunities for advanced training or learning (Pakes and Gunnlaugsson, 2018).

Findings: Seeking shallowness in Iceland's open prisons

The above description now serves as a starting point for the identification of characteristics of shallowness as far as material conditions are concerned. To start off, shallowness is relatively easily

described in physical terms: you can visually identify it. Shallowness is visible in those features that help allow prisoners not to feel buried, or lost. The physical features of both open prisons in Iceland provide for that in various ways. First, there are no walls or fences reducing feelings of being locked in. With few obvious physical markers of the periphery, staff in fact need to explain to new prisoners where the prison boundaries actually are. In one prison, this was done using an aerial photograph of the prison and its surroundings on which in a marker pen the boundary was marked up. This boundary was about 7 km in length. Walking around it was vigorous exercise taking in grassland, a bit of tarmac road, and the beach that was a mixture of dark sand, rocks and pebbles. In the other prison, I was invited to look out a window so that a staff member could point out two rather innocuous-looking small white posts that serve as the prison boundary markers.

The prison boundary is a heavily theorised and contested construct (Turner, 2016; Moran, 2015). Turner echoes Foucault (1977) to emphasise that boundaries can be transgressed by various senses, not least hearing and touch. She also makes the point that apart from a boundary with the outside world, many prisons contain internal boundaries between various prison spaces. This was only to a very small degree the case in both open prisons in Iceland. Although the open prison boundaries were innocuous to the point of almost non-existent, prisoners nevertheless told me of their desire to simply take one step over the boundary, so as to physically and symbolically, gain a semblance of control of, or even victory over, this boundary. The point is that while the prison boundary was hardly noticeable, for prisoners it had practical and emotional significance nevertheless.

In addition, the views are vast and stunning. In Kviabryggja the views are dominated by the imposing mountain Kirkjufell (*Church Mountain*, so-called because of its steeple-like peak) that lies just across a shallow bay to the South East. Snowy hilltops are visible all year round. North Atlantic sea views are available as well with the sea immediately next to the prison. In Sogn, the immediate view behind the prison is of a hill. The views from the front to the South are truly panoramic, surveying the Southern Icelandic plains with the Ocean visible, despite being at about 10 miles distance. This visual availability of the surrounding as well as their quite dramatic nature helps preserve a sense of place, often denied to those in deep imprisonment.

With the physical outside never far away and in no way sealed off prisoners are afforded a range of sensory experiences over and above the visual (see also, Herry et al. (2021) and Martin (2021) on the sensory importance of air in prisons in Myanmar). A further sensory factor is a lack of a typical prison soundscape that would involve the dangling of keys, the slamming of metal doors, and shouting across wings and landings. These sounds were absent, producing a prison environment that is a-typically tranquil from an acoustic perspective.

The presence of nature was more than a backdrop in other ways too. One prison had large numbers of sheep on its land which were cared for by prisoners. Although not unique to Iceland or to open prisons, here the presence of animals was successfully woven into everyday life. Here, in Western Iceland, there is the added sensory and psychological experience of being able to dip your toes in the water and feel the wind, the rocks and the black sand between your toes. Relatedly, Jewkes et al. (2020) interviewed prisoners in a seaside prison in the UK to find strong affective reactions to being able to see the sea and seaside activity from the prison (Jewkes et al., 2020, also Turner et al., 2020). In Sogn prison, there were chickens and greenery also cared for by prisoners.

In both prisons, there was space, both inside and outside and a good degree of free movement into these spaces. It means that prisoners could step outside, walk into a communal space and make their own way to places such as a classroom, gym or workshop. This relative freedom of movement was a key characteristic of the shallow prison conditions. The outside allowed for

exercise and also for time to be alone, outside. You could also be out of sight of others for some time, all factors that may make a prison experience, being locked up in a place where you don't want to be and with people you did not choose to be with, more bearable. In addition, the outside was used for socialising, sport and games, weather permitting. All this enhanced a sense of place, in which in particular the view of the sea and the mountains are important. Prisons are likely to feel much 'deeper' when prisoners find themselves in an anonymous building in a place they can't identify.

Shallowness comes more easily within smaller-sized establishments. In both prisons, getting lost was literally impossible and there were no areas carrying secrets. Neither prison had anything at all remotely resembling an isolation cell nor any other area for the purposes of discipline or segregation. That degree of depth was just not there. Although there were few areas where prisoners were not allowed to enter, most of those areas were actually open to them somehow, for example, after knocking and were not shrouded in secrecy. The staff room in Kviabryggja in fact doubled up as a prisoner reception area with prisoners popping in and out regularly. In Sogn, the same would require a knock on the door. Either way, the size of these prisons and the relative lack of areas that were off limits added to their shallowness.

Shallowness was also evident through visiting arrangements. These were most generous, particularly in Kviabryggja: whilst visitors had to be pre-booked, there was precious little in the way of the prisonization of such events. Visitors simply drove up to the establishment, parked their car and walked in. Visitors could spend time in either the dining area, outside or even in the prisoner's own room. One prisoner was visited by both his parents and part of the visit involved walking the family dog around the prison perimeter, which meant being out of sight of any staff for some considerable amount of time. In Sogn, there was a reception area that allowed for a more structured approach to visits, which remained, nevertheless quite loose. One establishment allowed conjugal visits by stealth simply by allowing prisoners to spend time in their room with partners unsupervised and with the door closed. As prisoners can lock their door from the inside this could provide sufficient privacy for sexual intercourse.

Still, shallowness was most widely experienced by the use of mobile phones and in-room internet (however with obvious built-in restrictions including a ban on social media). It allowed prisoners a high degree of virtual presence in the lives of some of their loved ones. Some prisoners used the video call service Skype to speak with loved ones literally every single day. Others used websites like Youtube for maintenance of their professional skills. Another used his phone and the internet to keep a small business going. In this way, prisoners felt less removed from their families while for some the damage that prison frequently does to jobs and careers was, at least to a degree, ameliorated. With only the odd exception, prisoners certainly did not feel as if the outside world had lost any meaning, or was completely out of reach.

Finally, whilst virtually all prisoners worked only on-site and did hardly ever leave the establishment for work, short trips off-site were quite common. Mostly accompanied by a member of staff, visits to the supermarket, a doctor, bank or other service were common, and usually took place in a regular car driven by the staff member. Thus, both the experience and the means of transport kept the outside world in view. I was also told stories of outings for prisoners like rounding up sheep for the winter, or a hiking trip to a nearby waterfall. I did not witness any of these events but they were on several occasions relayed to me as adventures.

In short, the physical and the interactive conditions of these open prisons can only be described as very shallow indeed. As a lack of depth, in a way, is conceptualised in the way the outside world enters the prisoner experience, it is clear that the outside world is simply hardly ever out of reach.

Whilst that may give concerns of pseudo-freedom as described by Shammass (2012, 2014), it is nevertheless the case that the prison experience in these two prisons is less disruptive to life and self and far less 'burying' than is often reported in other prisons.

Findings: A shallow prisoner experience?

In this section, I will focus more on how prisoners talk about their prison experience. In early exchanges during my stay, prisoners frequently referred to the prison as 'easy' or 'nice'. Initially, staff were praised as decent and kind and much was made about the excellent food, the free strong coffee on tap and the quality of amenities such as the toilets and the kitchen. Invariably prisoners valued having a mobile phone and generous access to the internet. Prisoners also tended to agree that in open prisons you are more likely to be surrounded by prisoners who are relatively mature and socially adjusted. This helped give shape to a prison climate that was not characterised by volatility. Thus, in initial conversations, almost all prisoners painted a very positive picture highlighting some of the material and social conditions that can be seen as shallow.

In particular, the use of the internet was a topic of much praise. Unlike in Iceland's closed prisons, the generous in-room internet provision added a great deal to the quality of life inside the two open prisons. One foreign national prisoner explained: *'I can talk to my daughter. You know, help her with things. And I talk to my wife almost everyday on Skype. I'm sort of "there" you know. Ok, I'm not there, but I'm still a dad. I'm not closed off from all that'*. This ability to maintain a certain domestic presence, albeit online, was much valued by most prisoners.

Like depth, shallow imprisonment comes with a lexicon of metaphors. These metaphors were often oppositional to descriptions of closed conditions. Prisoners frequently compared open and closed conditions in Iceland as *'heaven and hell'* or *'water and wine'*. In addition, the open prisons were frequently characterised in non-prison terms. They were, as the cliché goes, referred to as a hotel, with one prisoner showing me the seaview from his room quipping that tourists would pay good money for such a view. It was frequently referred to as a farm as well. Another prisoner spoke more disparagingly, referring to the prison as a *'petting zoo'*, indicating that the prison was too soft, at least for him. He would argue that this place is better suited to more vulnerable or immature prisoners, for whom he had no small amount of disdain. Another agreed: *'Yes it's friendly here - and that's good. But it means that I start my day saying "good morning" to a rapist at breakfast. I hate that'*. Thus, the pain of spending time with people you despise remains in these shallow conditions.

More than one prisoner referred to the threat of being returned to close conditions as a return to 'prison'. This expression carries the interesting implication that their current residence did not quite qualify to be termed a 'prison': the term 'prison' is instead reserved for closed establishments. The forced return to a closed prison does on occasion happen: *'It is the one trump card they've got'*, one prisoner said to me.

There is, unsurprisingly, a strong relational aspect to how shallow imprisonment is experienced. In order to illustrate this, it is important to highlight some social moments. There were plenty, such as prisoners smoking together with staff, communal meals and watching football on TV for which a sizable group tended to gather, consisting of both prisoners and staff. The cordial relationships that I had expected to find were in evidence on a daily basis. During a conversation I had with the governor in the dining area he poignantly said *'my work is here'*, meaning the communal area, as opposed to being locked away in an office focusing on paperwork. In the other prison, prison officers were 'locked away' substantially more, an irony not lost on prisoners who joked that only the

chickens and the officers are usually behind closed doors. But that said, meals are shared, whereas smoking together, chatting, or simply sharing a bench outside were everyday occurrences.

However, in terms of staff–prisoner relations, there is more than what can be gained through initial impressions. In fact, I subsequently encountered a good deal of ambivalence towards staff by prisoners. I saw them for instance mocked and gently teased. Their skills and training were also frequently called into question in particular by older prisoners or those on longer sentences. According to some prisoners, staff were lazy, simply passing the time by chatting. Others saw them as ineffectual, having little impact on the running of the establishment. Several prisoners argued that they themselves, in fact, were the driving force behind the prison. Prisoners explained that they did the cooking and the cleaning and were also involved with general maintenance. Indeed, during my fieldwork three prisoners spent considerable time on the roof of a barn fixing a leak. Others were doubtful about the disciplinary prowess of the staff. It was argued the staff were untrained and unequipped for dealing with unruly or violent prisoners. One prisoner, in fact, used this as an opportunity to position himself as an informal violence manager: arguing that prison officers would be unable to keep order should violence ever erupt, he explained to me that in such situations he would act as a self-appointed guardian. Although for some a lack of deep respect for staff may result in mild ridicule, for this prisoner it represented an opportunity for status elevation, if only in theory. Another made a similar point: *‘They’re just peasants. Plucked off a farm and now they work here. But they know nothing about psychology. They don’t really do anything’*.

Although officers explained to me that spending time with prisoners in informal settings was an essential part of their work, many prisoners perceived this to be anything but work but just ‘sitting around’. To be fair, prisoners felt safe to be in the hands of friendly and unthreatening staff but did complain that officers could do more for prisoners, for instance in providing training and organising opportunities for work off-site. These prisoners were clear that prison conditions were much better than in a closed prison, but felt that more could be done to make their stay more productive. Work offered was often manual, perhaps even menial. There was little in the way of work or training to enhance a prisoner’s chances back in society.

For some, this lent certain vacuousness to the experience. *‘This is like the most boring summer holiday’*, one prisoner said to me. For some, offering a tranquil environment is just not enough and some of the activities that are on offer to fill the void are regarded with contempt. For example, an officer who wanted to organise a games get-together for prisoners was praised for the initiative by some prisoners and ridiculed for it by others. For several prisoners, their time in these open prisons dragged on. *‘The longer I’m here the less I like it. Initially I was relieved. In Hólmsheiði [closed prison] we had to cook together. That was a real mess. Here they cook for you and it’s great. But once you are settled, time goes slow. You have to keep yourself busy because there is nothing to do’*. Another said: *‘If you look, you see that everything goes slow here. People walk slowly. If they do work, it goes soooooo slowly. People take ages to do the simplest stuff’*. Finally, that feeling of vacuousness despite the friendliness was pinpointed by an Icelandic prisoner as follows: *‘This is like a school. But you don’t learn anything’*.

There were other ways in which the experience of prisoners differed depending on certain characteristics. This was certainly the case in terms of visiting. Although some enjoyed extensive, relatively private or even intimate visits, others were less fortunate. Most foreign national prisoners had very few if any visits. For several, this enhanced their sense of isolation. Some of them spoke of the prison as a prison within a prison, where the second layer of imprisonment referred to the remote country of Iceland. One such prisoner, from Western Europe, complained that his elderly mum was

unable to visit, as the journey, first to the international airport and then to the remote prison, would be impossible for her to undertake. This double remoteness both of the country and the remoteness of the prison within that country brought an extra degree of depth to the experience of some foreign national prisoners, despite the shallowness that characterised the establishment itself, as Ugelvik and Damsa (2018) also found. Some foreign national prisoners expressed disdain for Iceland, and its perceived lack of cultural and culinary refinement (cf. Ugelvik (2011), again highlights that imprisonment in a strange land does 'deepen' the experience considerably (see also Brouwer, 2020).

Finally, another way in which shallowness was discernible was through other aspects of personal relationships. I was struck by the extent to which prisoners knew about the private lives of officers. This did not seem to be in any fashion regarded as extraordinary. For example, when an officer who was on sick leave visited the prison informally, it was clear that many prisoners knew the details of this officer's illness. In fact, prisoners had a good deal of informal knowledge of the lives of staff: they knew where they live and who socialises with whom outside work. In addition, staff members did bring their lives into the prison in ways that are frequently unthinkable elsewhere. A staff member sometimes brought their dog to the establishment and one member of staff even on occasion brought their underage child. None of these things seemed to be regarded as extraordinary, or even troublesome. On the one hand, this shows that prison officers, in their actions, seem to treat the open prison like any other workplace, instead of one uniquely dominated by considerations of risk. On the other hand, it is an example of how shallowness can be identified in the routine crossing of prison boundaries in a multitude of ways, some of them quite unexpected.

Conclusion: Shallow yet subtly boundaried

In summary, the physical and the social characteristics of these two open prisons in Iceland are shallow. Important aspects of shallow imprisonment include meaningful visual and sensory aspects such as a view and the ability to have easy access to nature in a range of sensory ways: to feel wind in your face, sheep skin on your hands and seawater on your feet. Also, there is a lack of prison-like features so that not every sight, object or sound reminds you of the fact that you are imprisoned. Thus, shallowness comes with both positive identifiable features and also with some negative features by which I mean, important absences of prison-specific aspects such as bars, walls and slamming metal cell doors.

Shallowness is associated with permeability and non-conspicuous boundaries. But while shallowness is most strongly experienced in a sensory interaction with the outside world, most prominently in the minds of prisoners is the connection to the outside world through the internet and mobile phones. Being able to be in your room, close the door and speak with loved ones via the screen, daily, and frequently without interruption is the primary means through which the outside world enters the prison, almost to the extent that it acquires, for some at least, a semi-permanent presence. It was this interactivity, this virtual accessibility of the outside world through the internet and mobile phones that most prisoners appreciated most and that provided the strongest antidote against the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). This was most essential to prisoners and most characteristic of everyday life: it was not the prisoners leaving the establishment on a regular basis, but rather the outside world coming in, and the virtual aspect of this was invariably emphasised over the physical visits that some, but by no means all, prisoners also enjoyed.

To summarise more succinctly, this article has identified the following ‘shallow’ characteristics. They include non-conspicuous yet meaningful boundaries; enhanced mobility within the prison and its outside spaces; little or no off-limit, or secretive spaces such as segregation areas; unimpeded access to nature and the keeping of animals; the availability of space, quietness and privacy; almost unlimited access to the outside world including loved ones through phone and internet; and, friendly, seemingly non-hierarchical foundations to staff-prisoner relations and interactions which, in small establishments creates an environment in which everybody is on a first name basis with everybody else. All of these characteristics lead to a prison environment that resembles the outside world more and makes prison far less of an alienating and identity-assaulting setting.

Such a configuration of characteristics suits the older, and more self-sufficient prisoners very well. However, it may not offer quite enough structure and support for some of the more vulnerable prisoners for whom specialist care is lacking. It also suits most staff as the work can be carried out without any in-depth training and without the pressing need to achieve anything specific over and above offering a safe and tranquil environment. It is, therefore, a setting that simply works for the good majority of prisoners and staff, despite the fact that many prisoners expressed frustration about a lack of further opportunities.

Based on interviews with imprisoned sex offenders both in Norway, Ievins and Mjåland (2021) characterised imprisonment for them in Norway as ‘benign storage’. It is safe and decent, but at the same time, prison seems to lack purpose and ambition in relation to preparing prisoners for a better life outside after imprisonment. This to a degree applies to the prisoner experience in Iceland’s open prisons too, where the environment is safe and material provisions excellent but at the same time prisoners express frustration with a lack of opportunity for work outside the prison, for higher level certificated learning or other activities aimed at life after prison. ‘Benign storage’ may suggest a degree of depth as the term storage is frequently used in relation to describing deep imprisonment. Here however, it refers to a certain aimlessness of the prison, and that aimlessness is liable to be internalised as a certain meaninglessness so that being in these open prisons remains ‘doing time’, but in more pleasant surroundings and conditions and less closed off from the outside world than usually associated with prison.

A final note refers to the genealogy of these arrangements. It is true that very small prisons operating within a very small prison estate in a small country in terms of population provide good pre-conditions for shallow and permeable prisons. Despite arguably, a lack of deep professionalism and ambition there is decency. That and the lack of a large bureaucracy lend transparency to the prisons over and above the fact that they are easy to survey without any hidden spaces or secret cellars. In these conditions, together with societal and historical conditions discussed in Pakes and Gunnlaugsson (2018) perhaps decency is what is most easily achieved. That perhaps is the most important lesson of time spent in two prisons that represent both the far end and the shallow end of imprisonment in Europe, that shallowness begets decency.

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