The depth of imprisonment

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Abstract
Based on a large, comparative study of prisoner experiences in England & Wales and Norway, this article explores the concept of the ‘depth of imprisonment’ – put most simply, the degree of control, isolation and difference from the outside world – in two stages. First, it sets out the various factors that contribute to ‘depth’ i.e. its core components. Second, it outlines the most frequent metaphors used to communicate depth, highlighting the ways in which these metaphors bring into focus a range of ways in which the basic fact of imprisonment – the deprivation of liberty, and the removal of the individual from the community – is experienced. In doing so, the article also makes a case for the adoption of conceptual metaphors as a means of describing prison systems and regimes, and thereby attending to the ways in which prisoners experience some of the most fundamental elements of incarceration.

Keywords
depth, freedom, imprisonment, metaphor, restriction

According to James Fernandez:

Every anthropologist knows that the really fine ethnographies are sensitive to local figures of speech, the chief of which is metaphor. [Metaphors] lie at the base of inquiry and animate it. (Fernandez, 1986: 28–29)

Certainly, prisons are replete with metaphor. In describing their experiences, prisoners very often use metaphorical terminology to evoke their existence, reaching

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for what Fludernik (2005: 3–4) summarises as ‘correlative areas of human experience comparable to prominent features of the carceral situation’. As Michael Carrithers (2009: 40) notes, ‘Metaphors widen our understanding by ‘bring[ing] in another domain of thought to a topic or speech’, or, to quote Fernandez (1986: 11) again, by moving from ‘the inchoate […] to the concrete’, that is, to something that can be grasped beyond its local meaning. In the context of the prison, because metaphors are both expressive and comparative – providing vivid representations that communicate shared qualities between different domains of experience – their analysis offers the possibility of better understanding the textural qualities of imprisonment. Not only do metaphors help prisoners convey aspects of confinement that might otherwise be difficult to communicate; they also bestow a means of organising what is communicated into coherent themes.

Based on a large, comparative study of prisoner experiences in England & Wales and Norway, this article explores the concept of the ‘depth of imprisonment’ – put most simply, the degree of control, isolation and difference from the outside world – in two stages. First, it sets out the various factors that contribute to ‘depth’ i.e. its core components. Second, it outlines the most frequent metaphors used to communicate depth, highlighting the ways in which these metaphors bring into focus a range of ways in which the basic fact of imprisonment – the deprivation of liberty, and the removal of the individual from the community – is experienced. In doing so, the article also makes a case for the adoption of conceptual metaphors as a means of describing – and, potentially, comparing – prison systems and regimes.

The ‘depth’ of imprisonment

In his 1988 analysis of British and Dutch penalty, *Contrasts in Tolerance*, David Downes observed that comparative accounts of imprisonment tended to focus on sentence length, but that prisoners themselves were concerned with the nature of their punishment as well as its ‘amount’. In seeking to capture this distinction, Downes introduced the concept of the ‘depth’ of imprisonment, an idea that he refined four years later, to emphasise the relationship between the institution and the world beyond it:

> By depth of imprisonment is meant the openness of the prison life to the outside world, both in terms of the actual opportunities for contact with family and friends by visits, home leave, letters and the telephone, and also by the permeation of the institution by outside world agencies, whether recreational (visiting pop groups, etc.), informational (access to the media, newspapers, etc.) or social (visits by students, politicians, academics, etc.). (Downes, 1992: 15–16)

As King and McDermott (1995) subsequently highlighted, this definition of depth corresponded with the way that prisoners used phrases like ‘being in the deep end’ to refer to high-security prisons and highly-controlled conditions, often connected to substantial sentence lengths. While King and McDermott dwelled only briefly
on the concept of depth, their evaluative comparison of five representative prisons for adult males emphasised its significance to the prisoner experience. Depth, in its most basic form, was an elemental aspect of imprisonment: ‘It is in the nature of things that prisons are about security. A prison that consistently failed to hold its prisoners in custody would be a contradiction in terms’ (King and McDermott, 1995: 58).

Among the factors that King and McDermott regarded as constituting depth were physical and dynamic security measures (e.g. CCTV, perimeter security, the use of security dogs), searching practices (in relation both to cells and bodies), the closeness of supervision and restrictions on movement. Overall, their findings demonstrated that ‘To a remarkable degree the determination of a prisoner’s security categorization also determines the nature of his experiences in prison’ (King and McDermott, 1995: 322), in the sense that ‘most situations were rated more favourably the lower the security category of the prison’ (p. 323). However, not everything ‘followed the security gradient’ (p. 323): prisoners in HMP Nottingham felt themselves to be ‘deeper in’ the system than their peers at HMP Featherstone, even though the former was a lower-security establishment than the latter. The fact that, at the same time, the men in Nottingham were less weighed down than those in Featherstone, in terms of the psychological burden of imprisonment, was what led King and McDermott to distinguish between ‘depth’ and ‘weight’, with the latter referring to the ways in which treatment and conditions bore down on the individual psychologically. ‘Depth’ itself was far from straightforward. Distinctions between such matters as control and security, or closeness of supervision and the limitation of movement, meant that it was possible to be in a prison that was highly restrictive but contained pockets of relative freedom:

In Gartree [at that time, a high-security establishment], it was certainly possible for prisoners to get some distance from staff, most particularly in the television room and the games room, and to some extent hide in their own or other prisoners’ cells. But movement off the wing was grossly curtailed and always accompanied by staff and dog patrols. (King and McDermott, 1995: 86)

While King and McDermott’s analysis advanced the concept of depth very significantly, it did so somewhat literally. Indeed, a considerable amount of scholarship has described the objective qualities and effects of carceral restriction, particularly in its more extreme manifestations (e.g. Drake, 2012; Haney, 2003; Reiter, 2012; Shalev, 2013). Elsewhere, scholars have highlighted the subjective nature of the ways that prisoners experience their conditions. For example, in his study of prisoners serving their sentences on Norway’s ‘island prison’ – an open establishment, in which prisoners lived in self-organizing cottages, with a considerable degree of autonomy – Shammas (2014) emphasises the various forms of ambivalence that characterise being in such conditions, including the oppressive need, in the absence of situational security measures, for self-control (see also Neumann, 2012). Some prisoners expressed a preference for serving their time in closed
prisons, where more rigid, controlled and isolating regimes accelerated time, sheltered them from stresses relating to the community and imposed on them fewer demands to self-govern. To quote one prisoner cited in Shammas’s article, ‘in a way, being here is harder [than being in closed prison]’ (2014: 115).

The point here is to emphasise that the complexity of depth is an outcome not just of its formal qualities (e.g. restrictions on mobility), and the particular ways they are configured in different establishments, but also a set of subjective dimensions. These dimensions are particularly germane because depth is essentially about the relationship between the prison and the outside world, meaning that an individual’s assessment of the composite impact of forms of restriction, isolation and seclusion within a carceral environment is likely to be shaped by the nature of their existence prior to their confinement and their expectations of the world to which they will return. To put this more simply, the degree to which being separated from free society and confined to a penal institution feels painful, oppressive and destructive is determined in part by what it is that the individual is being separated from – whether, in their life outside, they felt stable and autonomous, for example (see Crewe and Ievins, 2019) – and their familiarity and comfort with the environment that has become their temporary home.

This relative quality means that depth seems particularly liable to metaphorical description. Indeed, in her analysis of metaphors in which prison is the ‘target domain’, Fludernik (2005) identifies a range of themes – ‘prison is hell’, ‘prison is like free society’, ‘prison is anonymity’, ‘prison is refuge’, ‘prison is freedom’ – in which comparisons to other domains of life and social contexts abound. Such themes relate to forms of restriction, but are not limited to them. To offer to a definition elaborated in an earlier text, then:

\[ \ldots \text{the simplest definition of depth might be the distance or polarity between the prison and the outside world, with distance having an almost literal as well as a metaphorical meaning. (Crewe, 2015: 24)} \]

This conceptualisation encompasses sentence length – distance from freedom – as well as the impact of security and control measures on the prisoner’s sense of autonomy and the remoteness of their existence. Given that these matters of liberty, separation and constraint are elemental qualities of imprisonment, it is striking that so little attention has been directed towards the concept of depth.

**The research project and methods**

Between 2016 and 2019, as part of a large, comparative study of penal policy-making and prisoner experiences, around 700 in-depth interviews were conducted with male and female prisoners in England & Wales and Norway. The overall research project comprised four sub-studies, three of which are pertinent to this article. The first was a longitudinal study of prisoners’ experiences of entry into and release from prison, mostly undertaken within local prisons (mainly holding
prisoners on remand, or shortly after having been convicted and sentenced) and lower-security establishments, including open prisons. The groups specifically sampled in this study were ‘mainstream’ male prisoners, female prisoners and men convicted of sexual offences, most of whom were serving sentences of less than two years. The second sub-study involved semi-ethnographic studies of two prisons in each jurisdiction holding men convicted of sexual offences and one in each jurisdiction holding female prisoners. The third was a study of the ‘deepest’ parts of each prison system: in England & Wales, the ‘Close Supervision system’, comprising units located within high-security prisons, holding men considered too difficult and dangerous to be managed in normal conditions; in Norway, units in two establishments holding men serving indeterminate ‘forvaring’ sentences.

Interviews were conducted one-to-one in private rooms, typically lasting between one and three hours, and occasionally longer. Almost all were recorded, with the consent of participants, and were transcribed verbatim (those conducted in Norwegian were translated into English). All participants were given pseudonyms, which are used in the extracts below, alongside specification of the type of prison in which they were being held at the time of interview. Data were coded using NVivo software, with the analysis based on an overall thematic reading of the material from all of the 700 interviews.

While the objectives of each sub-study differed, the scaffold for each – and the basis of the coding tree – was a comparative framework organised around the conceptual dimensions of ‘depth’, ‘weight’, ‘tightness’ and ‘breadth’ (see Crewe, 2015). Issues specifically relating to depth were probed through a series of questions about matters such as the degree to which prisoners felt in touch with the outside community, how far away they felt from the free world, how different life in prison felt from life outside, and how they thought about freedom and release. The formulation of these questions – including the experiential emphasis on ‘feeling’ and the comparative implication of contrasting imprisonment with freedom in various ways – was designed to generate discursive responses that probably leant themselves to metaphor. While narrower, more literal questions were asked about security measures and restrictions on movement, they were less prominent overall in our interview schedule. In this regard, one limitation of the study is that the data might be skewed towards particular kinds of representational forms.

For the purpose of this article, data analysis was shaped by a hybrid logic, combining inductive and deductive approaches, but with the latter somewhat more prevailing. Here, the idea was not to test theory so much as organise interpretation around an a priori concept. At the same time, and to avoid narrowing the analysis excessively, many aspects of the process were more open-ended. The interviews themselves were informal, leaving space for participants to reflect on their experiences in relatively unstructured ways. Many questions were phrased in a manner that was consistent with an inductive logic; for example, participants were asked such questions as ‘how much control do you feel you have over your life in here?’, ‘how would you describe your relationships with officers on this wing’, and ‘how decent do you think your overall conditions of living are in
here?’. The coding of interview material to nodes relating to ‘depth’ included responses to questions of this kind, as well as those that sought to address this concept more directly. Furthermore, the analytic process set out very deliberately to refine our understanding of depth, and identify its form and structure, rather than just assess its frequency or distribution.

A strength of the conceptual framework is that it offers axes of distinction, enabling comparison along a range of dimensions without implying that the assessment of prison regimes is straightforward, or can be concluded through reductive ideas of ‘better’ and ‘worse’. This is important, because it is difficult to say whether a prison that is run by prisoners rather than staff, but which allows family visits and considerable internal mobility (the Latin American model) (see Birkbeck, 2011), is better or worse in any simple sense than the safer but more restrictive prisons of Western Europe. Moreover, to give another example, of relevance to England & Wales, at least, the ‘softening’ of penal power (Crewe, 2011b) makes the use of orthodox, evaluative terminology much more problematic. Some of the increasingly significant features of imprisonment – such as being subjected to forms of psychological power – are not only less visible than the more familiar pains of confinement, but are harder to interpret and quantify. As Shammas (2014: 115) concludes:

While viewing prison conditions through the optic of ‘humane’ or ‘inhumane’ conditions arguably produces a flattening, one-dimensional gaze – the task of prison scholars might better be understood as studying how punitive power varies in kind rather than degree, how the nature of pain-imposition varies qualitatively, producing incommensurable pains that are to some extent not easily given to cross-national comparisons.

Accordingly, a prison might be conceptualised as shallow, tight and heavy or as deep, loose and light, without requiring a decisive evaluative conclusion.

A second strength of these concepts is that they are sufficiently fuzzy to straddle different cultures and jurisdictions. Just as metaphors offer short-cuts from the specific to the abstract, moving ‘the inchoate [...] to the concrete’ (Fernandez, 1986: 11), conversely, their abstraction and imprecision can be helpful in ensuring that comparisons are not predicated on practices or assumptions drawn from one culture and subsequently imposed upon another (what Nelken (2009) calls ‘ethnocentrism’). To give an example, the concept of ‘tightness’ (Crewe, 2011a), used to capture the impact of forms of soft and psychological power, is broad enough to encompass a range of policies and practices that might otherwise feel non-comparable because of dissimilarities rooted in local contexts. Rather than fixing the comparison on highly specific features - rehabilitative interventions, or staff-prisoner relationships, for example – the framework draws the focus towards textural qualities of imprisonment that are more abstracted but at the same time more experiential. The term ‘texture’ is therefore apt, implying both a set of objective characteristics and a sense of how these characteristics feel, just as a strip of satin or sandpaper might be described as having certain textural properties (based on their physical composition) but also a more sensory quality.
The analysis is not intended as a piece of comparative work, as such – that is, its aim is not to compare the metaphors from the two jurisdictions in which we undertook fieldwork. Rather, it is to offer a provisional inventory of metaphorical forms that might be used in comparative studies in the future. It comprises a range of responses, which not only highlight the subjective experience of depth, but also bring into relief its different components and determinants. Perhaps most significantly, these metaphors expose the relationship between the prison and the outside world that is core to the nature of imprisonment.

**Components of depth**

Depth is generally associated with high-security conditions, holding individuals at greatest distance from freedom. However, even prisoners in local establishments – generally serving relatively short sentences, often close to home physically or near to release temporally – described prison as very different or distant from the outside world. In response to questions about how different the prison felt from the free community, terms such as ‘another world’ (Jacob, local prison), ‘completely different’ (Roman, local prison), ‘upside down’ (Mikhail, local prison) and ‘chalk and cheese. [...] poles apart’ (Archie, local prison) highlighted the contrast that most prisoners experienced regardless of whether their sentences were long, whether they had been removed from society for long periods, or the security of their conditions. Asked ‘How far away from your kind of normal life do you feel in here?’, Reggie (local prison) replied: ‘Oh yeah, 1,000,000% away’.

Distance was sometimes referred to in terms that were literal: i.e. being many miles from home, and therefore less likely to receive visits. But prisoners who were close to their communities often distinguished between physical proximity and psychological distance. Dexter, for example, reported feeling ‘quite close to the free world’, but at the same time ‘a million miles away’, while Elijah explained that, despite the free world being ‘close’, he felt both isolated and highly restricted:

*How far away from the free world do you feel at the moment?*

When I look out of my cell and I can see houses, there’s houses over there, if that’s what you mean, I feel quite close to the free world.

*Metaphorically speaking...?*

In myself, if that’s what you mean, I feel like I’m a million miles away, but to make myself feel that I’m close to the world I look out the window and I see those houses so my mind tells me that I’m not that far from the outside world... that tells me that metaphorically that I’m close to the world but I’m actually not, it feels like I’m a million miles away.

*And in what ways does it feel the most different...?*

Just locked up, looking out the windows you see bars. (Dexter, local prison)

I feel very isolated, very isolated. Yeah. At the moment the free world is just, it is out there but it is close, but at the moment so I am just... there is no freedom. There is no
freedom of choice...you can’t get anything you want, from a cup of tea to a cigarette to a chat with someone. (Elijah, local prison)

Here, then, rudimentary forms of physical security and restriction were the basis on which lack of freedom was experienced. As stated more explicitly in the extracts below, what often made the prison world feel so different was not being free.

How different is it here from the world outside?
Widely different. They are two different worlds. On the outside you are free. (Dina, women’s prison)

How far away from the world outside, from life outside do you feel in here?
You cannot compare because freedom is freedom. [...] You cannot do things on your own, everything you do has to be in control.
So does the world out there feel a long way?
Yeah. (Nicholas, high-security prison)

Other characteristics of depth included the alien nature of the prison timetable (in which meals were eaten and days ‘ended’ at much earlier times than in the community), the removal of personal autonomy, and the inability to engage in mundane activities:

We’re all locked down by six-thirty, that’s it, day’s finished, that’s your bedtime, basically. And that’s not how the real world goes, is it? (Bella, local prison)

Does it feel very different from the outside world?
Yeah. I get told when to go to bed. (Dexter, local prison)

Do you feel far away from freedom when you’re in here?
Yeah, course you do. It ain’t like I can open that door and just go for a wander. If I want to go to the toilet I’ve got to ask them to open the door for me to go to the toilet. So yeah, I’m far, far, far away from freedom. (Zachary, local prison)

Many prisoners referred specifically to the sense of disorientation that resulted from losing track of rapid technological change, or from the inaccessibility of mobile technology – the inability to use Google, and the jolting reminder of their circumstances that resulted from not having a phone by the bedside on waking up each morning.
Normality was also spatial. Prisoners who were in unfamiliar locations described a sense of alienation resulting from being in ‘the middle of nowhere’, or in parts of the country they did not know:

How far away from the free world do you feel in here?
I’ve got no idea where we are right now, like I’ve got no idea where this is. I know it’s in Milton Keynes somewhere,¹ but yeah I have no idea. No idea where anything is from here. (Andrew, medium-security prison)
The importance of place and its role in structuring identity meant that merely being contained in an unknown area, with unfamiliar accents, or in a rural rather than urban location, could compound feelings of removal. By contrast, participants in local prisons, which were generally situated in the middle of towns and cities, communicated the importance of being able to see ‘normal life’ going on outside.

In A Wing, you couldn’t see anything, and there’s no natural way for you to see anything on the outside. And it might sound silly, but it’s little things like that that help you mentally. Like you can see a train line from my cell; you can see a train go past, and that’s normal life. So that’s normality, and you kind of bizarrely cling onto little things like that. (Luca, local prison)

Within prison, depth also related to the possibility of having ordinary conversations and relationships (‘I feel miles away […] There’s no-one really you can talk to’ [Erin, local prison]), and to aspects of the natural world and physical environment, including the degree to which buildings and activities felt as they would on the outside. Bella (local prison) described the environment as ‘not natural really. You’re in a bubble. You don’t get any fresh air’. Jesper, in a high-security prison in Norway, commented as follows:

When I talk about seeing grassy lawns, it’s easy to think that you’re just going for a walk outside. But as soon as you look at the very communist colours, everything here is grey, then, yeah. The buildings are very boring, and the brick walls are brick colors. So, if you start to think, then it’s very prison-like to just look around. But if I’m in the gym, it’s a normal gym [and here] it’s a totally normal room with offices around. (Jesper, high-security prison)

In conceptualising depth, one important distinction is between what might be thought of as ‘surface’ and ‘land’. That is, it is possible for prisoners to feel close to the world outside in terms of contact, but – like a snorkeller, close to the air, but stranded in the open sea – to be many years from the landfall of release:

Do you feel like this place is quite removed…?
No, at the moment I know it’s just out there. [But] I also know that I’ve probably got a few years before I get out there. So it feels a few years away. That’s how it feels to me, but I know it’s right there. (Alexander, local prison)

In particular, prisoners who were in Close Supervision Centres in England & Wales – mainly serving very long sentences, and sometimes whole-life tariffs – often commented that they remained ‘in touch’ with the outside world, through visits, telephone calls and access to television and radio, and therefore did not feel completely severed from the community, but at the same time were so many years from liberty that the free community barely registered as a point of reference for their existence (see below). Here, we see the temporal dimension of depth to which I will return.
Yet even when prisoners felt that they were ‘in contact’ with the world beyond the prison through newspapers and television, often they felt ‘out of touch’ with the information flows that mattered most to them. Carlos (prison for men convicted of sex offences), for example, explained that, while he phoned his family every evening, he nonetheless felt very removed from society, because ‘my area has changed so much, and I’ve missed so much of my nieces’ lives’. Often, prisoners talked of the dissociation that resulted from not having access to their local paper (‘I miss all that so I’m completely out of touch’ [Emmitt, medium-security prison], or being unable to follow intimate events in their home communities, such as pregnancies, marriages and deaths. For example:

What makes it most different…?
You don’t really know what’s going on outside. It depends, like obviously if you’re outside and you live on the estate, in a small area, you know what’s going on round there every day, and when you come to prison you don’t really know what’s going on in your area, and it’s just weird you know, it’s crazy like it’s weird. You don’t really…like it’s mad. (Roman, local prison)

Do you still feel like it’s very, very different from the outside world?
Yes. It’s a lot different. Sometimes on the outside you’d be sitting down and a friend will call you up and say, ‘Guess what?’ Someone has just had a baby, or, Someone has just got engaged. When you’re behind that door, you hear stuff on the outside like officers talking or shouting or an alarm going off and you haven’t got a clue what’s going on. And you won’t find out because that door will stop you from knowing anything. (Jacob, local prison)

A further distinction was between being able to follow what was going on in the community and being able to experience it:

You can hear what’s going on from the news, and you can hear what’s going on from your family or your girlfriend or your friends, but you don’t get to experience it. I’d normally be taking my niece down to London for the Christmas lights, I ended up watching part of it on TV, and it’s not the same feeling: you’re sat there and they’re like counting down, and then they celebrate, and you’re like ‘well normally I’d be there with my niece on my shoulders celebrating with them, but I can’t do that’. (Charlie, local prison)

Feelings of distance were therefore compounded by events such as Christmas, which reminded prisoners both of their lack of autonomy (to go out shopping, for example) and the forms of intimacy that they were missing:

[In prison X] I felt totally like the world was going on without me, especially being in there before Christmas, and suddenly you’re bombarded with all these adverts of shiny, happy families under the tree and I just felt totally like that’s the real world.
and this is some circle of hell. So when I was in there I felt really ostracised. (Archie, local prison)

Archie’s phrase – ‘some circle of hell’ – exhibits the metaphor that Fludernik (2005) identifies as being most common in literary representations of prison. Metaphors of this kind tell us about how the components of depth combine and interact, in relation to matters such as distance from release, biographical experiences, and expectations of the future, and how they combine into a particular structure of feeling. In the following section, we outline these metaphors in more detail.

**Metaphors of depth**

As set out in Table 1, metaphors of depth varied considerably in their nature and underlying themes.

Fludernik (2005: 5) remarks that ‘the two most common, even hackneyed, source metaphors for imprisonment are the identification of prisoners with hell and with live burial, coffins or tombs’. Certainly, the idea of prison as a nightmarish other-world was very prominent in our participants’ accounts, less because of the kind of carceral noise, filth and darkness that Jewkes (2015) identifies with ‘Medieval imaginings of eternal damnation’, than due to a more nebulous sense of *being elsewhere*, in circumstances that were highly undesirable. Ariana (local prison) described prison as ‘a different world. Almost like it’s got a veil over it. Or like a ghost type place’. Abu (local prison) reported that ‘they said that when you come in to the first time in a prison, as soon as you enter, that’s it! You feel you’re in a hell, yeah, it’s in hell.’ (Abu, local prison). For Erika (local prison), ‘This is a nightmare and out there it’s a dream. And there’s a longing. My thought; everything is at home’. Here, then, the metaphor signalled the primacy of suffering and distress.

A more frequently used metaphor was that prison was like a *box*. In these descriptions, prisoners referred to being ‘shut’ or ‘locked’ away, or placed in some form of ‘storage’. For example:

You’re just existing. You’re not serving any type of purpose. Your body is trapped in an invisible barrier. (Gary, open prison)

| Metaphor | Hell | Box (storage) | Box (restriction) | Coffin | Liberation | Bubble (safety) | Bubble (normality) |
|----------|------|---------------|--------------------|--------|------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Themes   | Suffering | Suspension Submersion Immobility Abandonment | Distress | Loss of control, Burial Interior | Atrophy | Stasis | Freedom | Comfort Abnormality | Nightmare | Distraction |

You’re just existing. You’re not serving any type of purpose. Your body is trapped in an invisible barrier. (Gary, open prison)
Three months is a really long time to be shut away from just life in general [...] You just feel like you’re existing, it’s just an existence, it’s not life. (Lucy, local prison)

I don’t know if anything really important has happened [outside]. I feel I have just been in a storage container. (Ruben, high-security prison)

In such representations, life was devoid of meaning, purpose or rehabilitative input. Prisoners talked of simply being contained, of ‘just existing’ rather than living – a kind of ‘atrophy’ of the soul (Jewkes, 2015) – and of simply waiting for their sentence to end. Some used related ideas of cages or kennels to signify the moral and existential consequences of their treatment:

It feels like we are deadly dogs or something. Shove them in the kennels for a couple of weeks and then put them down. (Carter, medium-security prison)

I was [in a segregation unit] for nine weeks, I just felt like an animal, you know, like it was just weird, it’s crazy how life is, you know, it’s just mad for a human being to just be locked in a room, you know, it’s just mad. (Roman, local prison)

A related theme within this metaphor was temporal: the feeling of being static or in suspension, of one’s own life being ‘on hold’ while time passed and the world continued beyond the prison:

You are just waiting for it to be over so you can be released. I feel like I have been in a waiting box. (Lone, women’s prison)

I’ve just been locked up, that’s it, I’ve just been locked up away from society, away from my family, I’ve just been put away. It’s like they’ve picked me up and put me in a box and shut the lid and then they’ll open the lid when the time comes. (Mollie, women’s prison)

This terminology was generally employed by prisoners serving short sentences. It was significant, in this respect, that they expected to return fairly quickly to a social surface that was relatively unchanged:

It just feels like being in a big box and time stops, you’re sort of stuck in here like a time machine, really, until you walk out that door and then life starts again. (Mason, local prison)

Mason’s coping mechanism was to imagine that he was a worker on an oil rig, as if completing a long, offshore shift, before returning to the mainland. In Isabelle’s account, the idea of the goldfish bowl carried the same implication – the sentence
represented a temporary and existentially hollow break from a life that would resume as normal on release:

I feel very restricted in here […] like my life’s on hold. […] It’s almost like you’re in a bowl really, in a goldfish bowl […] and while you’re in here you’re just going round and round and round, and then at the end of it you’ll be out of that bowl and this will have gone and not be part of your life. (Isabelle, local prison)

For prisoners serving longer sentences, or convicted of crimes with more acute social consequences, the temporal dimension differed. Carlos – serving a five-year sentence for a sexual offence – described his sense of being on a platform as life went by:

It’s like being at a train station and the train just keeps going past and it just doesn’t stop. You’re standing still, life is going forward. […] You’re the guy running along next to the train.

Yes, yes, trying to jump on [laughter], or at least trying to keep up with what’s going on.

Here, then, real life did not simply ‘await’ the point of release. It moved on, leaving the individual in its wake. Indeed, for many prisoners, as a result of the nature of the offence, and its impact on anticipated stigma and the severance of contact by family and friends, the outside world was irrevocably changed. To return to the terms above, the most important aspects of the surface were no longer there, and while landfall might not be far off, its nature and appeal were irrevocably changed.

The metaphor of the box was also used to describe basic feelings of restriction: the general loss of liberty and everyday limitations on choice, movement and personal autonomy. Both Charlie and Harley emphasised the way in which, wherever they were in the prison, they felt ‘boxed in’:

Whether you’re in the cell, out in association, out for exercise, or in the [prison] library, even if the walls are 60 foot away from you in all directions it still feels like you’re in a little box room, like in your own solitary confinement. You literally always feel alone because it always feels like the walls are crushing in on you, because you know that you’re not really allowed to leave where you are. (Charlie, local prison)

For me, the walls are thick. […] Prison just brings you in your own world, and then when you’re in your cell and in your own world, like a little cocoon. Even though you’re in prison, you’re in your own box; in the cell, you’re in another box because you’re restricted. (Harley, local prison)

Other prisoners used the idea of the barrier or membrane – a kind of sub-metaphor – to convey their experience of being relatively close to the ‘surface’, but nonetheless restricted from it. Evelyn (local prison) explained this experience as a form of
house-arrest - ‘in some house which I can’t leave’ – rather than being in a different world, as such. Another specified that ‘it doesn’t feel like we’re up on the moon or miles away from anywhere, it just feels like there’s a wall between us and your freedom’ (Russ, local prison).

It is notable that these kinds of metaphors were generally used by prisoners in local prisons, mainly holding prisoners on short sentences. In contrast, for men in the Close Supervision system – the most secure units in the England & Wales prison system – the box was experienced more like a coffin or a ‘living tomb’ (Guenther, 2013: xii). Whiile prisoners rarely employed such terminology specifically, they were implied by metaphors of burial, submersion and suffocation (see Fludernik, 2005). These terms partly communicated the experience of being, at best, restricted to a highly constrained physical environment, and, at worst, the tomb-like quality of being locked in a cell with very limited access to natural light or elements (Wacquant, 2002). More significantly, it expressed a sense of abandonment, loss of hope, and immobility – being buried alive far away from society’s eyes, ears, and mind’ (Wacquant, 2002: 373) – resulting from exceptionally long sentences and the feeling that progressing out of such units was so difficult. Dirk explained that ‘You start to feel that you’re suffocated – there’s no exit route’; Yiannis commented that ‘Time’s just stood still for me at the moment. I’m just stuck in a cave, without a ladder’; Christophe conveyed an almost total lack of hope and agency: ‘You can be buried and lost in the system. It doesn’t matter how much I do: I’m no further forward than the day I came into custody’.

Yet for some participants in these units, the idea of depth as the distress caused by being distanced from the outside world was inadequate. The qualities of the outside world had become immaterial. Such men had never felt part of the free world in the first place, or were serving sentence lengths so long that freedom and the free world felt irrelevant:

The outside world is kind of irrelevant to me. […] I’ll be in my 60’s before I have any real chance of getting out. (Elliot, Close Supervision unit)

Nothing exists for me outside these walls. It doesn’t apply to me anymore. The only thing that applies to me is custody. People outside have become not relevant to me anymore. (Ricardo, Close Supervision unit)

At this point in the system, then, the objective extent of depth – mainly in the form of distance from release – dissolved any distinction between imprisonment and an alternative, contrasting existence. The polarity normally provided by the outside world had little meaning.

Likewise, at such depth, and with the outside world so remote, some men became almost exclusively adapted to the highly limited parameters of their freedom. Points of reference became almost entirely interior and solipsistic, and the sense of being confined virtually collapsed. Several prisoners in these units took issue with the idea that they were unusually constrained. Some disputed that the outside world was any less existentially restrictive than the super-secure
environment in which they were located, or argued that their restriction was illu-
sory. Henry dismissed prison as ‘just a state of mind’. When James was asked how
far he felt from the free world, he queried the premise of the question: ‘it’s not a
free world’, he said, ‘I’m more free than [prison staff], in my mind’. Stefan offered a
similar logic, stating that he was no less free than anyone: ‘it’s just that the bars are
a bit closer [than outside]’.

This rationale, in which the free world and the prison were analogous, with the
former no less constraining than the latter, inverted normal assumptions and ref-
ference points, and turned the prison into the source rather than the target domain
of the penal metaphor (Fludernik, 2005). It suggested a form of perspectival supe-
riority, in which – drawing on Duncan (1996) – ‘by virtue of their seclusion and
relative stillness’ (p 13), and freed from the trivial and mundane, the prisoner could
‘engage life at its most profound level’ (p11). In spatial terms, Duncan argues, the
sense is of the prisoner being almost ‘above’ the world, ‘as if [surveying it] from an
enormous height’ (p11) or fathoming it from a higher plane of consciousness.
From this position, the prisoner believes that he or she operates with an unusual
degree of moral and spiritual lucidity, and is able to see life for what it really is.

As Duncan (1996: 41) notes, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the idea that
‘one can be freer in prison because the real life is the life of the mind [...] represents
the use of a primitive defence mechanism: denial’. Yet she also recognises the
possibility that prisoners may genuinely feel that they are able to transcend their
physical environment, to ‘be in prison and yet be free’ (p 41), in terms of their inner
existence. Certainly, some of the men who expressed this sense of being mentally or
existentially free had educated themselves while in prison, forging an interior space
of escape and fortification, and coming to see the world through a new prism. For
others, forced to ‘rely on the isolated resources of their own subjectivity’
(Guenther, 2013: xii) and turning almost entirely inwards as their mental health
disintegrated and they became pathologically ‘unhinged’ from the world’ (p xii),
normal boundaries between the self and the exterior world collapsed.

Other prisoners within the Close Supervision system used a terminology of
social liberation. A number spoke of their relief at being insulated from the obli-
gations and tensions that defined prison politics in the high-security prison system.
Several described the elemental sense of freedom that came with knowing that
there was – to quote – ‘nothing more that the system can do to me’ (Harris). More
commonly, they explained that they did not want to be in a less restrictive
environment, because of anxieties about physical and psychological safety: what
others might do to them and what they might do to others. For example:

The only thing restrictive in here is you don’t mix with prisoners, and I find that good.
[...] This is my comfort zone. (Brendan)

Again, then, whether interpreted at face-value or as a means of coping with
extreme conditions, comments of this kind suggest a lack of correspondence
between the objective nature and subjective experience of depth.
The idea of a comfort zone – expressed in the quotation above – was used by prisoners in other parts of the prison system, primarily through the metaphor of the bubble. Many participants felt safer in prison than outside it, because life in the community had been characterised by abuse, or – for men convicted of sex offences – due to fears of retaliation. In such circumstances, the walls of the prison were experienced as comforting as well as constraining, the kind of womb-like characterisation that Duncan (1996) identifies as being a common motif. The bubble was essentially protective, or, as suggested below, a site that enabled temporary respite and relief from the demands and cruelties of life outside:

*How thick do the walls feel in here?*

The walls. You know, these walls are actually quite comforting, more than anything. In here we know we’re safe, in a way. Yes, stuff happens, but you’ve got to wind someone up for that stuff to happen. These walls are actually quite safe. (Hamish, prison for men convicted of sexual offences)

You don’t get bills, you don’t get stressed, you don’t get worried, you know you’re safe. Prison is... it’s real, you’re living, you’re breathing, but it’s not a real world is it. It’s a protected world. [...] You might get punched, but it’s going to get stopped pretty quickly. [...] I’ve had things happen to me out there, brutal things, like when I got raped for example, or being attacked out there. [...] I’ve been left half dead in the gutter in the rain after someone’s spiked [my drink] with something. I’ve had horrible things happen to me. [...] I like to come into jail and shut off from the outside world. [...] when I’m in jail I’m in jail: I’m in my little bubble. (Abigail, local prison)

In such portrayals – most often expressed by female prisoners and men convicted of sexual offences – prison was depicted as unreal, but as preferable to – a break from – the grim realities of life in the community. While both groups feared assault, the former (as well as chronic drug addicts, for example) were temporarily shielded from forms of abuse and degradation with which they were already familiar, while, for the latter, imprisonment delayed the experiences of stigma and retribution that they were anticipating on release. In some establishments, pleasant gardens and internal freedom of movement within a fenced perimeter made the bubble metaphor particularly adept. The non-normality of being coercively confined or the sense of being ‘within’ a temporary membrane was experienced, in relative terms, as something positive, or, more ambivalently, as something whose boundary points were protective as well as segregative.

Other prisoners used the metaphor of the bubble to communicate the abnormal nature of the environment in terms that were more pejorative. References to the fake, limited or disquieting nature of conversation (the emphasis on criminality or sex, for example), to particular rules, routines and norms (‘you get so out of the habit of having anyone touching you in a normal way’ [Gerard, local prison]), and – among prisoners convicted of sex offences, especially – to the ‘strange’ habits,
beliefs and demeanour of fellow prisoners communicated a sense that the world of the prison was distorted, or that the texture of life just felt ‘wrong’. For example:

It’s almost like a TV show in here [laughs], because nothing in here correlates to anything outside of prison. [..] As social conventions go, there’s nothing in here that equates to anything anywhere near the real world. There’s nothing in here that I’ve seen that’s replicated anything that I’ve ever done before in my life. [..] At lunchtime on here, we have a quiet time where you have an hour’s sleep at lunchtime and stuff, and it’s bizarre. It’s like a dream world. [laughter] It’s just, I don’t know, odd. (Keir, prison for men convicted of sex offences)

In contrast, some participants described the prison as an environment that was more ‘real’ or ‘normal’ than life outside as a drug addict or alcoholic (see Crewe, 2009; Crewe and Ievins, 2019). Describing her journey to the prison, Bella (local prison), for example, described feeling relieved, ‘because I could not wait to get to a bit of normality’, while Freddie (local prison) argued that his drinking habit meant that: ‘I didn’t really have much of a liberty to begin with [..] I was drinking every bloody day, it was another prison, but just with a bigger fucking cell’. Charita (local prison) explained that ‘Every time I come back to jail, it does make me feel a bit alien because I’ve sobered up and I’m used to being drunk, so it’s like, ‘Hang on a minute. I’m in reality now.’ In these ways, adverse biographical experiences meant that normal distinctions between freedom and incarceration, and between the real and unreal, were inverted.

**Discussion**

Depth is a highly spatial metaphor, in the sense that it refers to restrictions on mobility and the individual’s sense of the outside world in relation to his or her current predicament. While the idea of depth has typically been expressed in terms of *verticality* (i.e. being ‘buried beneath’, for example), prisoners often describe the relationship with freedom, and the world outside, through other spatial terms. To feel removed, lost, hidden from view, left stranded or in stasis is to be in a *lateral* relationship with the world. To be in a box or a bubble is to exist *within* it. To feel that one is looking down on the world from a higher existential plane – paradoxically, a condition associated with being most deeply buried objectively – is to sit *above* it.

One way in which this is significant is that, while vertical notions of depth imply a surface to which prisoners eventually return, the subjective reality is very often much more complex than this implies. For many prisoners, lengthy sentences, or the consequences of particular kinds of offences, mean that there is nothing ‘beyond’ the prison, or the beyond that is anticipated is now so different from the one from which they were removed. In this regard, depth has a temporal component, both in relation to distance from release and the particular expectations that different prisoners have of their future. These expectations range
considerably: storage suggests a sanguine sense that the future awaits unchanged; metaphors of tombs and coffin imply the opposite: total pessimism about any sense of life beyond the present; discourses of liberation indicate a kind of temporal transcendence; bubbles of safety and normality suggest trepidation about life after release or the fact that life has permanently changed. Understanding depth therefore requires us to consider, and draws attention to, prisoners’ life circumstances prior to imprisonment and the relationships, lifestyles and possibilities to which they will return (Jefferson, 2017). Indeed, the experience of depth is shaped by the extent to which prisoners feel safe, normal and constrained in the free community, as well as by prison conditions themselves, so that even a very short sentence can constitute an extreme form of respite, removal or restriction. In essence, the exploration of depth represents an attempt to understand the textural experience of the deprivation of liberty, and this texture exists only within the relationship between the subjective experience of imprisonment and freedom. One implication – which might be assessed more systematically in future research – is that depth is shaped significantly by forms of social positioning and identity, such as ethnicity and gender, which might shape wider feelings of safety, inclusion, optimism and other such matters of salience.

Finally, in considering the impact of depth, and the means of mitigating its effects, the discourses that have been elaborated in this article suggest that normalising the prison environment requires more than the extension of legal and civil rights, the minimisation of security and control, or the enhancement of material conditions so that they align with those in the community (important though these are). Since much of the experience of depth is about whether prison life feels in some way abnormal – unnatural routines, skewed conversations, social mistrust, dislocation from the emotional texture of life at liberty – concerns to limit the damaging effects of imprisonment should include but look beyond the more obvious contributions of restriction and isolation. Even when prisoners do not feel entombed, and are not held in very secure conditions, the basic abnormality of life in almost any carceral context can make the environment feel like an alternative social and relational universe.

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Notes

1. Milton Keynes is a large town about 50 miles north of London.
2. The idea of the ‘bubble’ is certainly suggestive of something whose protective features are only transient or leave the individual ill-equipped for life beyond it. Certainly, many prisoners expressed anxiety about returning to real life after years in an environment that had shielded them from it:

You’re in a bubble, it feels like the world is going on without you. […] The world has moved so fast, so when I get out it’s a new world for me. But in here, you still think it’s like that but it’s not. So you’re in a bubble. (Adrian, prison for men convicted of sexual offences)

When you come out it’s a big shock to your system, getting back into life because you’ve lived this false life for so long, it’s quite a shock getting back into normal life. (Molly, local prison)

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