

# DEPTH, WEIGHT, TIGHTNESS, BREADTH: SPATIAL METAPHORS AND THE TEXTURE OF IMPRISONMENT

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Dr Ben Crewe

Institute of Criminology

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# Metaphor

‘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: 28-9)

- ‘They’re dangling carrots, so you’re walking on eggshells’
- ‘It’s like being in a boat on the sea without oars’
- ‘They keep turning the screw on you’

## Penal theory and comparative penology:

- harshness/mildness assessed via imprisonment rates, 'conditions', inputs, official sources, etc

## Limitations:

- Imprisonment rates = scale rather than nature/'texture' of confinement
- The prisoner experience is psychological/relational, as much as material
- Official aims, rhetoric and intentions  $\neq$  outcomes on the ground
- Single measures never do justice to the experiential complexity of imprisonment

‘Foucault’s outlook lacks the tools [...] to distinguish licit from illicit exercises of power [...] he does nothing to help us distinguish among more and less malevolent forms of domination’ (Shapiro 2012: 314)

# Depth/ weight/ tightness/ breadth

- **Depth** (see Downes 1988): distance & difference from outside world  
e.g. security, control, permeability
- **Weight** (see King and McDermott 1988; Liebling and Arnold 2004):  
oppressiveness, burden & use of authority, interpersonal treatment
- **Tightness** (Crewe 2009, 2011): invasiveness, grip, impact on  
personal identity & self-regulation
- **Breadth**: reach & impact beyond the prison e.g. stigma, 'disabilities',  
etc

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# Weight

*Do you know where you stand with [staff]?*

Yeah. **On the bottom of their shoe.**

[Staff here] are not **on your back all the time** . . . instead of being on your back for every little thing, 'don't do this, don't do that' . . . like a boot camp.

In here you're treated as an individual . . . you're a person; in there you're not, you're a number, **you're just a piece of meat with a number on it**

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# Tightness

You're under observation from day one.

*So on what basis do you think you're being judged?*

By the way you carry yourself, and the people you hang about with. . . I even think about who I walk round on exercise with, and what I have on the walls of my cell, things like that.

'I'm documented as a list of negative incidents, and that's how I'm perceived ... you're not listed as a person, you're not listed as a personality, you're not listed as likes and dislikes ... they're attuned to write negatively about you because they are writing about risk, so all they highlight is risk'

You have one minor incident and they'll go write it in the file. That's gonna catch up with you in two or three years time: a silly little incident, every few months, a minor indiscretion. [...] you add em all together and they show a pattern of something that's not really there.

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(Shammas 2014: 115)

Deep



Shallow

Heavy



Light

# Absence

‘There’s no structure. There’s no rules. It’s a free-for-all and staff barely exist ... I’m involved in more criminal activity in here than I was on the out. That’s not good, is it? I don’t think that’s what prison should be for’

‘Well it’s just a more relaxed atmosphere here I think, but with that comes all the bullying and things like that’

‘No one really takes any notice of them. [...] You can back-chat the staff and nothing really happens’.

‘I think for everything to run properly there has to be rules, and those rules to a certain degree have to be kept, right? **If somebody asks you to do something here and you say ‘no I’m not doing it’ , [...] then they should be able to have the power and weight behind them to actually to enforce it’ .**

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# Depth/ weight/ tightness/ breadth

- Depth (see Downes 1988): *distance* & difference from outside world e.g. security, control, permeability - *restriction on movement*
- Weight (see King and McDermott 1988; Liebling and Arnold 2004): oppressiveness, *burden* & use of authority, interpersonal treatment – *imposition of power, downward force of moral judgment*
- Tightness (Crewe 2009, 2011): invasiveness, grip, impact on personal identity & self-regulation – *incursion of power; envelopment & entanglement of self*
- Breadth: reach & impact beyond the prison e.g. stigma, ‘disabilities’, etc – *drag and imprint of power, beyond prison the boundary*

Depth: 'You kind of do feel *a million miles* [away]'

Weight: 'There's more leeway. There's no *weight* to them. [Officers] are too young'

Tightness: 'The screws [used to] let you know: 'you step over that line, and I'll have you'. These days, they'll let you step over the line. They'll give you enough rope to hang yourself. You can just *tie yourself up* and then kill yourself with it'



# Depth

*How cut off are you from people outside?’*

I speak to my dad and my little sister all the time. [...] I write all the time. [...] *And do you feel that you’re still in touch with what’s going on out there?*

Yeah, I listen to the radio, news every half hour, and I read the paper every day.

*Do you still feel in touch with what’s going on in the world outside?*

To a degree yeah, because I’ve got a TV and my radio, so I watch the news

*Is [it] a concern for you, that the world is changing and...?*

Not really, it makes no difference to me the outside world, I’m in jail aren’t I. I’m not just in jail, I’m in a jail within a jail, so 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.

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# Depth

‘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’

‘I never felt part of the free world. I don’t really have human relations. I don’t really get on with people. I have no empathy .... I’m as close to the world outside as I was when I was there’

‘You start to feel that you’re suffocated – **there’s no exit route**’

‘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’

Metaphor of *burial* beneath the ground → *submersion* (surface + land)

# Depth

Liberation rather than burial/suffocation:

- Release from the stresses and demands of prison politics
- ‘Nothing more that the system can do to me’
- ‘It’s not a free world [outside]’
- ‘...it’s just that the bars are a bit closer [in here]’

# Tightness

Tightness can be 'lateral' as well as 'vertical' e.g. 'performative regulation:

'...people submit themselves to the authority of an institution, internalize its values and enact them through mutual surveillance in an inmate culture. Power operates horizontally as well as vertically, as members monitor each other's conduct, sanction deviance and evaluate their own progress in relative terms'. (Scott 2010: 221)

# Lateral tightness or 'performative regulation'

'And I do turn round and say, "You need to go on the course, and pronto. [...] You need to sort your life out. You need to sort your thoughts out, your patterns"'.

'Having heard what they've done, I don't think I could sit in the same room and not try and judge their body language or how they are reacting to certain things that are being said to see whether or not they are taking it on board in the right way'

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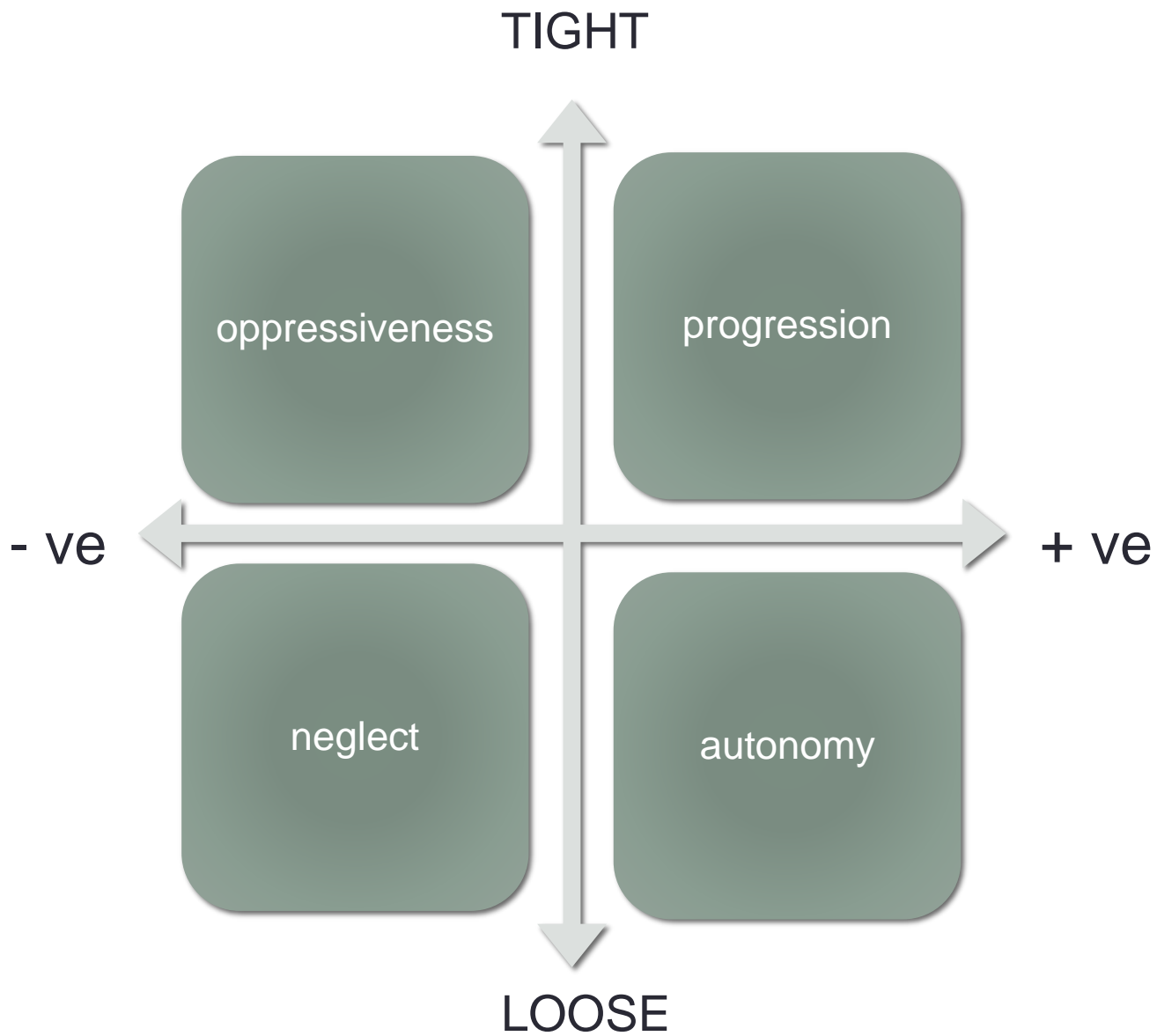
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Prisons can be *loose* as well as *tight*

- demanding yet deficient

Tightness can be welcomed

- a) to enable progression
- b) to help remedy perceived pathologies





# Tightness

- Both tightness and looseness can be positive or negative.
- Tightness as the 'fairground claw machine':  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9t5ZqeHcYk>

# Breadth

Fears about imprisonment extend into life *preceding* confinement:

‘He was in the queue for approximately five months, and he describes the waiting as hell. He was isolated, he almost didn’t leave his home, he woke up every morning and thought about it, he hated the time of day when the postman came, he felt like throwing up several times. He considered leaving the city and disappearing. He was afraid and shameful. When the letter finally came, he said he was relieved. A friend contacted the prison on his behalf. She drove him to the prison. In the car, he kept thinking “finally, I am on my way”’

(Fieldnotes, Kristian Mjaland)

# Breadth

‘It’s a rehearsal for death’

‘The stench of our crimes will follow us around forever’

‘The biggest problem with being in prison isn’t even here [i.e. within the prison]’.

‘You have to just face it, your future life is not going to be normal’.

‘How are you going to rehabilitate if you’re constantly under a watch? You’re not going to have a life. You’re always going to be that person who did that thing.’

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# Tightness & depth

‘[My psychologist said] ‘you’re caught in a vicious cycle’, and she’s correct. They do things to me, I challenge it, they don’t like the fact that I’m successful predominantly with the challenge, so they go and write something about me, that buries me deeper. ... For me personally, I think I’m at an impasse ... until I put my pen down the prison is never going to progress me ... I’m going to get the same treatment with my pen as I would have done if I was fighting the system [in the past]’

‘Psychologists are trying to get more ammunition to bury me deeper in the system’

## Further references

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