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Theoretical and empirical limits of Scandinavian Exceptionalism: Isolation and normalization in Danish prisons

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Abstract
Drawing on interviews with 76 prisoners, 47 prison staff, and 14 experts, we document lived experiences of punishment in the Danish prison context. We argue that, regardless of "humanizing" elements of normalization and humanity, prisoners and staff may experience the power of the carceral state in Denmark in ways similar to those under more obviously harsh confinement regimes, as exist in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, macro-level theories like Scandinavian Exceptionalism serve as a rhetorical tool, implying that harsher prison systems are fixable, but fail to reflect the micro-level realities of incarceration.

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In 2015, we interviewed a prisoner housed in long-term solitary confinement in Denmark's highest security prison. While serving his 10-plus year sentence (a lengthy sentence in Denmark), he attempted escape multiple times, was held in isolation on and off for more than six years, and alleged he had been beaten to the point of unconsciousness by prison guards. When we arrived at the locked, windowless room where we would conduct our interview, we found him carefully laying out crepes he had made for us, which we shared together while we talked. As American prison scholars, the experience of chatting over crepes with a prisoner who otherwise spent 22 h per day isolated in his cell was unprecedented. In Denmark, it is part of the "normalization" of life in prison; even prisoners in long-term isolation have an hour per day to prepare their own meals in a small, shared kitchen.

Over the course of nine weeks of fieldwork, we documented the normalization that lies at the heart of "Scandinavian Exceptionalism"—the idea that prisons in Norway, Sweden, and Finland (the Nordic countries), as well as Denmark and Greenland (included within the larger umbrella of Scandinavia) tend to be small, characterized by collegial prisoner-guard relations, and committed to providing robust social services like education and job training to prisoners and staff (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013; Pratt, 2008a, 2008b). But we also documented prisoners' experience of the pains of imprisonment, especially the deprivation of autonomy, as well as the ways in which Danish prisons, like prisons throughout the world, are a constantly negotiated order (Sykes, 1958/2007). Examining how punishment is experienced by prisoners and negotiated by staff in Denmark allows us to both "do theory at a micro-scale" (Valverde, 2012: 250) and "challenge traditional understandings of the penal realm" (Hannah-Moffat and Lynch, 2012: 119). Specifically, we examine the power struggles that define punitive experiences in Denmark—focusing on how prison staff set limits and prisoners experience these limits, in a negotiation that frequently compromises the system's ability to normalize life in prison. This micro-level theorizing both complicates the substance of Scandinavian Exceptionalism and also suggests that Scandinavian Exceptionalism debates have, ironically, failed to diversify prison studies. The debates have, instead, re-focused scholarship on the United States (and, to a lesser degree, the United Kingdom) as the definitive paradigm against which all punitive systems are compared.

Our surprise at both the frequent and extended terms of isolation deployed in Denmark and the other pains of imprisonment prisoners experienced raises questions about the role Scandinavian Exceptionalism has played in the wider scholarship of punishment and social control. Rather than being an accurate or nuanced analysis of the lived experience of punishment, Scandinavian

Exceptionalism has served as both a rhetorical tool with which to critique harsher prison systems, especially in other developed countries, and as an aspirational goal implying that harsher prison systems are fixable with just a little more humanity, a little more normalization, or a little less brutality. Examining more closely the lived experience in Danish prisons, however, reveals that suffering is fundamental to incarceration, with or without the mantle of the brutality that we have come to equate with harsh punishment.

Macro-level implications of going local

Modern, macro-level explanations of punishment in the global West demonstrate remarkable cohesion in their aims: theorizing and empirically documenting the sweeping punitivity that has reigned for the past few decades, or carving out large exceptions to it (see, e.g., Ashworth and Zedner, 2014; Garland, 2001; Melossi et al., 2011; Pratt, 2008a, 2008b; Whitman, 2007). **[AQ1]** Garland (2001), for instance, explains the harsh punitivity in the US and UK as a result of a uniquely late modern "culture of control" that has taken hold in these countries. Such macro-level analyses, we argue, can overlook the most salient lived experiences of punishment, and mistakenly imply that two systems, like the United States and Canada, or Norway and Denmark, are essentially equivalent in structure and degree of punitivity.

Indeed, scholars have increasingly critiqued the collapsing of the US and UK into a single analytic category, taking issue with the "broad generalization" (Garland, 2001: vi) of such analyses. As Sparks (2001: 165) persuasively argues, "The sheer scale of incarceration in the United States, and its disparity from that in other countries … makes it difficult or impossible to calibrate US and European penal practices on the same scales." Beyond issues of scale, there are also crucial qualitative differences between the penal systems of the US and European nations, despite obvious convergence in key domains. Cross-cultural research on the development of penal policy has moved toward a more nuanced analysis of the apparent policy convergence in the US and UK, managing "both to acknowledge the existence of elements of cultural convergence in crime control while also drawing attention to important divergences" (Jones and Newburn, 2002: 197). In an effort to minimize the elision of political, cultural, and even penological differences that is so common in the criminological literature that emphasizes similarity and convergence at the cost of empirical specificity, we refer to "the US and UK" as a discrete entity only as is necessary to convey the relevant literature.

In contrast to characterizations of the US and UK in the literature as both investing in increasingly punitive policies over the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Scandinavian countries have been cast as "exceptional" at these same macro levels of analysis. Pratt argues that a culture of equality, institutionalized in the infrastructure of the welfare state and through a homogenous population sharing consistent social values, explains both the low incarceration rates and humane prison conditions observed in Scandinavian systems of punishment (2008a; see

also Pratt and Eriksson, 2013). When and where "social solidarity, security and homogeneity" decline, exceptionally humane Scandinavian punishment systems tend to become less humane and less exceptional (Pratt, 2008b: 275). Punishment and society scholars, however, have consistently called for—and provided—more attention to local variations in punishment and the influence of local-level culture and innovation on what at first appear to be macro-level social phenomena, like mass incarceration, zero tolerance, and mass probation (e.g. Campbell and Schoenfeld, 2013; Lynch, 2000, 2011; Phelps, 2017). [AQ2]

Scandinavian Exceptionalism provides an especially fruitful example of the limitations of macro-structural explanations for how punishment is constituted and organized. In fact, a robust and growing body of scholarship, incorporating local- and micro-level empirical analyses of how punishment is imposed and experienced, has complicated macro-structural explanations of Scandinavian Exceptionalism, like Pratt's. While Pratt has acknowledged that harsh punishment practices are expanding in Scandinavia in the 21st century (see also Aas, 2015; Barker, 2013), other scholars have noted that surprisingly harsh punishment practices, including long-term solitary confinement (Smith, 2012) and other "intrusive deprivations of liberty" (Barker, 2013), have existed for decades, if not longer, in Scandinavia—far before Pratt articulated his exceptionalism theory. [AQ3] Scandinavian scholars, in particular, have criticized Pratt for his lack of nuanced, on-the-ground knowledge of Scandinavian punishment systems, arguing that the lived experience of incarceration in Scandinavia reveals that prisoners endure significant discomforts, including the pains of lost freedom (Shammas, 2014), forced conformity to the ideals of the welfare state (Fredwall, 2017), and ongoing stigma and functional resource shortfalls after incarceration (Olesen, 2017). [AQ4] More recently, a 2017 anthology, "Embraced by the welfare state?" argues that much of the literature both inadequately theorizes the pivotal concept of the "welfare state" and frequently overlooks the limitations on individual rights inherent in the Scandinavian systems of government and punishment (Smith and Ugelvik, 2017; see also Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012).[Please check whether the year "2017" added after the author names "Smith and Ugelvik" with respect to the reference list is correct.]

By focusing on the lived experience, rather than the stated goals of punishment, we find the tension between treatment and care, on the one hand, and safety and security, on the other, which faces prison officials across the world, also faces prison officials in Denmark. Prisoners in Denmark experience many of the same "pains of imprisonment" documented in prison systems across time and space and laid out in Sykes' (1958/2007) foundational work, especially the deprivation of autonomy. Likewise, Danish prisoners experience other pains of incarceration that scholars have added to Sykes' initial list, including frustrations with a system perceived to be illegitimate (Reiter, 2014; Sparks and Bottoms, 1995), severed ties with children (Bloom and Chesney-Lind, 2000; Pogrebin and Dodge, 2001), "unremitting loneliness" (Johnson and McGunigall-Smith, 2008:

337), the absence of respect and fairness (Liebling, 2011), and the salience of unmet expectations (Sexton, 2015).

These discomforts and pains are engendered by late modern prison regimes, which first and foremost deprive prisoners of their autonomy, while simultaneously emphasizing prisoner self-governance and responsibilization (Crewe, 2007; Sexton, 2015). In such regimes, the deprivations and strictures of prison are experienced not only as pains that "chafe and vex" (Sparks et al., 1996: 323), or weigh heavily upon prisoners (Downes, 1988), but also as an intricate web of control that "snag[s] and entangle[s]" prisoners as they engage in their daily lives (Crewe, 2011: 522). Crewe (2011: 522) describes this particular form of penal power in terms of "tightness"; it is a power that "does not so much weigh down on prisoners and suppress them as wrap them up, smother them and incite them to conduct themselves in particular ways." This web of control described by Crewe can be understood as the negotiated order (Strauss, 1978; Sykes, 1958/2007) of a late modern prison, through which prisoners and staff "modify formal organizational policy" (Thomas, 1984: 215) in the context of relationships constituted by both rule-enforcing and non-rule enforcing interactions (Liebling, 1999).

American admiration for the humanity of Scandinavian prisons (e.g. Lancaster, 2017; Larson, 2013; Slater, 2017), along with theories of Scandinavian Exceptionalism, both frequently overlook the web of control inherent to late-modern prison regimes. As one American scholar put it, Scandinavian prisons are a "polished glass nightmare," where "[n]othing you can see or touch or smell or taste, and no interaction with staff gives you anything to blame or resent about the system that brought you here," and so prisoners must endure the "existential weight" of taking full responsibility for their actions, rather than blaming an abusive system for their mistreatment (Larson, 2013). According to Larson, the system is experienced as harsh, without inflicting any brutality. Our research echoes Larson's observation that less brutality is not necessarily equated with less deprivation in Scandinavian prisons. But our findings are more complex.

First, we find that harsh punishment can and does exist in Danish prisons. They are not, after all, uniformly humane; there are scratches in the "polished glass" and certainly reasons to resent the system. Second, the "responsibilization," which Larson describes (and which, we argue, is fundamental to modern incarceration), can only be enacted through staff and institutional frameworks, which necessarily impose limits on individual freedoms. The particular ways that prisoners and staff describe the negotiation of limits—in the context of both open and closed prisons in Denmark—sheds light on the shortcomings of Scandinavian Exceptionalism as both a substantive explanatory model as an ideological agenda that other countries might emulate (see also Reiter et al., 2016).

Data collection and analysis

Throughout nine weeks of qualitative fieldwork over two summers (2015 and 2016) in the Danish Prison and Probation Service (DPPS), we conducted ethnographic

observations and informal interviews in two open and two closed prisons and toured six others.[1] We benefitted from a wide, though variable, range of access at each site. We overtly observed routine activities by staff and prisoners in each prison such as prisoner and staff interaction (including specialized living units devoted to substance abuse treatment, sex offenders, and segregation), prisoner participation in work and recreational activities, meal times (among prisoners and staff, separate and combined), the screening process for prison visitors, and staff responses to facility alarms. As outsiders, we largely took on the role of spectator-observers and were easily recognizable as such by prisoners and staff alike (see Goodman, 2011; Reiter et al., 2017). There were a few exceptions to our observer status. In three closed prisons, we participated directly in prison activities: we shared meals prepared by prisoners with both prisoners and staff, and we participated in two recreational activities (a hip-hop class at a closed prison and a facility-wide "Olympics" event at an open prison). We regularly took handwritten "jottings" (Emerson et al., 1995) throughout the day, and debriefed as a team upon exiting the field, in order to jog our memories to facilitate capturing in-depth fieldnotes later.

We also conducted formal face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interviews (n = 70) and a single focus group with a purposefully selected sample of prisoners (n = 6); prison staff in varied roles, including guards, teachers, foremen, section supervisors, lawyers, and medical staff (n = 47); and senior level prison administrators and prison policy experts (n = 14). The majority of prisoners interviewed were male (93%) and identified as Danish (69%).[2] These numbers are fairly consistent with the Danish prison population overall; as of 2015, 93% of Danish prisoners were male, and 59% were ethnically Danish (DPPS, 2015). Over half of the prison staff interviewed identified as male (58%), and the majority identified as Danish (81%). With permission from participants, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. For expert interviews, detailed notes were taken and later transcribed. All interviews were conducted in English, with varying degrees of fluency among participants. In most cases, interview notes and fieldnotes were taken by at least two and often three research team members and then layered in final form.

This research is situated within a constructivist approach to data collection and analysis. We approached the research reflexively, examining how our own status (particularly that of cultural outsider) emerged as meaningful at each stage. Inductive data analysis proceeded in several stages, beginning in the field through periodic memo writing around salient themes that emerged. This ensured that our process remained emergent (Charmaz, 2006), allowing the data to shape the interview guide while in the field. We began coding interview transcripts using Atlas.ti after the first round of fieldwork. We started with line-by-line open coding (Charmaz, 2006) of a small subset of interviews by four research team members. This was followed by discussion and comparative analysis of assigned codes. From this process, we developed an extensive list of shared codes and proceeded with a second round of coding by all team members followed by a discussion and analysis

of codes applied to sample quotations. Out of this process we created a list of focused codes around broad themes to apply to a diverse subset of interviews with prisoners, staff, and experts from each of the four key prison sites. We draw upon data analysis of this subset of interviews in this paper.

Findings

Our findings reveal that staff negotiate competing goals of incarceration on the ground, often foregoing principles of "normalization" in favor of enforcing rules, using various forms of segregation, and generally imposing what they call "limits" on prisoners. Although prisoners in Denmark undeniably experience a variety of unusual (relative to prison systems in the United States, for instance) freedoms across the system, even within the more constrained closed prisons, both prisoners and staff consistently emphasized the limits of this freedom. Limits experienced by prisoners and imposed by staff include constraints on prisoners' behavior, freedom of movement, and freedom of association. These limits are most evident in the many forms of isolation experienced by Danish prisoners—pre-trial solitary confinement, short periods of isolation as punishment for breaking prison rules, and more extended periods of isolation based on their status as gang members or prison security threats. But these limits also manifest in more mundane ways, including constraints on prisoners' participation in community activities, connections with friends and families, freedom of movement in prison and freedom to associate with others. Focusing on the lived experiences of prisoners and staff in Danish prisons allows us to identify both surprisingly punitive aspects of punishment (long-term solitary confinement) and unsurprisingly punitive aspects of punishment (deprivations of autonomy), thus challenging and adding nuance to the macro-level account of Scandinavian Exceptionalism.

Normalizing isolation

Prisoners in Denmark experience a range of forms of isolation, from pre-trial isolation in jails (Smith, 2006, 2012) to day-long segregation in "work rooms"— empty cells or classrooms where prisoners spend the work day if they refuse a work assignment, to week-long "disciplinary" isolation for getting caught with drugs in prison, and to months-long "administrative" isolation (called "exclusion from association") for escape attempts, attacks on staff, or more serious threats to institutional safety and security. Every high-security unit we visited also included a restraint cell—usually a windowless room stripped of everything but a table with leather straps for placing prisoners in four-point restraints. The conditions in Danish isolation cells vary. Sometimes, there is a window with a view of the prison grounds, a toilet, and shower in the cell, as in the country's newest prison facility, Enner Mark, which opened in 2006. Enner Mark has two-dozen long-term isolation cells and multiple other units with the ability to segregate prisoners into self-contained groups as small as six. Isolation cells in other prisons have only a slit

for a window and no shower or even toilet in the cell, as in some of the country's older facilities, like Vestre (the central jail in Copenhagen) and Politigården (the country's 25-cell, highest security isolation unit, also in Copenhagen). In isolation cells without bathrooms, prisoners must use an intercom to call an officer to escort them to the bathroom. Isolation cell doors, like other prison cell doors in Denmark, are solid wood or steel, preventing prisoners from seeing out of—and prison officials from seeing into—the cells when the door is closed.

In all the facilities, prisoners are permitted an hour or two per day of time in a concrete, outdoor exercise yard, usually alone, unless the prisoner has earned the right, through good behavior, to socialize with one other prisoner on the unit. In most of Denmark's isolation units, prisoners receive pre-cooked meals, which they eat in their cells, rather than being able to cook their own meals in a kitchen, as is the policy for general population prisoners. (Some prisoners in longer term "administrative" or "exclusion" isolation, like the one we interviewed who made us crepes, are sometimes permitted to cook their own meals.) Prisoners in isolation usually have a television, but limited access to telephones. They are usually permitted family visits—limited to a few hours and often directly supervised, with a prison guard in the room or watching through a window—at least a few times per month. (For prisoners *not* in isolation, visits can be overnight, and are in locked rooms or small apartments, into which guards cannot see.)

Danish prison officials deploy the many available forms of isolation frequently and for durations far in excess of the 15-day threshold identified by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, the boundary line between acceptable punishment and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment" when the harmful effects of isolation risk becoming "irreversible" (Méndez, 2011: 9). Of the 70 prisoners we interviewed,[3] 47 (67%) reported having spent at least some time in isolation during their incarceration. A forthcoming report by DIGNITY (the Danish Institute Against Torture) reported similarly high (and increasing) rates of isolation experience among Danish prisoners. Denmark has a total capacity of 3777 jail (pre-trial) and prison beds. In the last five years, as many as 3000 prisoners per year have experienced isolation for disciplinary reasons: 3044 prisoners in 2011; 2579 prisoners in 2015, and 2995 prisoners in 2016. Almost 10 years ago, in 2008, only 2430 prisoners experienced isolation, suggesting that rates of use are increasing overall, in spite of reductions in the use of pre-trial isolation over this period. These numbers do not include prisoners in "administrative" or "exclusionary" isolation in high-security facilities like Enner Mark and Politigården; the DPPS does not publicly report these numbers. Surprisingly, these rates of isolation use far exceed estimates of rates of use in the United States. A recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that only 18 to 20% of U.S. prisoners and jail detainees had spent time in "restrictive housing" (the new, bureaucratic term for a range of forms of solitary confinement in the United States) in the past year (Beck, 2015).

Not only is isolation common in Denmark, but prison officials deploy it for extended periods of time. When our research team visited Politigården, staff

reported that at least one prisoner had been there for 200 days continuously, and many more cycled through for months at a time. When we visited Enner Mark, we interviewed two prisoners who had each spent more than five years in isolation. These were all prisoners in "administrative" or "exclusionary" isolation. According to DIGNITY, of the thousands of prisoners who spent time in shorter-term "disciplinary" isolation in 2016, 222 were isolated for more than 15 days. Most of these were for relatively minor violations; 219 were for unlawful possession of a mobile phone.

While the scale and duration of isolation use in Denmark might be surprising within the context of a system characterized as exceptionally humane, prisoners' experiences of these conditions align with experiences in other countries. For instance, one prisoner explained that isolation left him feeling that

> my body is not—is not fresh … I feel I need some sun … there's more bad in the isolate … and it not help me when they put me in the isolate. I come … out and was still violent, and I still sell drugs.

Another described the lingering, haunting effects of isolation: "When you sit there, you don't feel anything . . if you see … people who are sit in concentration camps and that kind … they close down … . Those lights 24 hour."

An informal conversation with a group of prisoners in the workshop of a closed prison brought the effects of isolation to light even more concretely. One of the men had just been released from five months of isolation. This was not the first time, nor the longest period; before his transfer to the closed prison, he had been isolated in pre-trial confinement for five years. He explained that while in isolation the most recent time, he learned that his brother had died. He laid on his side for two weeks; he did not get up to go to the bathroom or to eat. He said the guards let him lay there. When he was finally released from isolation, he looked in the mirror and was horrified. His skin was gray and blemished, with what looked like sores or pox, and it seemed as though his flesh were being eaten away. He thought he had cancer. Even as we spoke to him in the workroom, a few days out of isolation, his skin was still sore and marred.

These prisoners' descriptions of "closing down" during and after periods in isolation, experiencing weeks of depression, feeling "not fresh," and noticing a pale gray skin tone echo descriptions of experiences of isolation described by American prisoners (Reiter et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2004), in conditions of confinement that have been condemned for violating international human rights standards (Méndez, 2011). **[AQ5]** As in the United States, even those working within prisons critique the use of isolation on both humanitarian and practical grounds. For instance, the head of custody in a pre-trial detention unit in a closed prison described her discomfort with the harshness of Danish isolation units:

> I don't like the places where they are locked up in 23 hours, and just one hour for going out and get some air… we have to let them out in the world again, and they

have to function out there. And it's not animals we are working with; it's human, yeah.

This blurring of the humanitarian ("it's not animals") and practical ("we have to let them out in the world") critiques foreshadows the ensuing analysis of how staff negotiate the humanitarian goals of a prison system that seeks to "normalize" incarceration and the practical demands of maintaining order and control through enforcing rules and setting limits for prisoners.

In spite of critiques, isolation use continues in Denmark—challenging the concept of Scandinavian Exceptionalism and revealing the limits of both humane and practical theories of punishment. Macro-level ideas about the socio-cultural factors shaping degrees of punitivity too easily overshadow micro-level details like the number of people held in isolation. Isolation experiences and practices in Denmark, then, not only reveal the importance of examining punishment at the micro-level of lived experience, they also reveal the potential for harsh incarceration at the deep end of even the most humane system of punishment. But just as Danish punishment is not uniformly humane—as evidenced by the existence and extent of solitary confinement use—neither is solitary confinement uniformly brutal. Even in the most highly controlled and coercive settings, humanity still emerges as a facet of the negotiated order of the prison, as is evident in the crepes example, which began this article. Indeed, the control and discipline so evident in isolation also co-exists with humanity and practicality throughout the rest of the Danish prison system.

Managing competing goals of incarceration

While Scandinavian Exceptionalism emphasizes the normalizing and humanizing aspects of incarceration, these prison systems are characterized by many of the same penological objectives as harsher prison regimes, and must attend to the same operational goals of safety and security, balancing institutional policy with individual, non-rule-enforcing interactions (Liebling, 1999; Sykes, 1958/2007; Thomas, 1984: 215). The same head of custody quoted above touched upon this in her description of the balance of care and security in her work:

Respondent:I think the care is—that's in the talking. We are listening a lot. Yeah, all the frustrations they have—we are listening to all their frustrations because a lot of times we can't do anything, but we can listen, and we can tell them that we understand them, and we can tell them that we'll try to give them an okay time in here, and that's what we can give them. But sometimes I think they have a feeling that somebody's listened to their frustration. That's enough, yeah.

Interviewer:And then the security piece?

Respondent:Yeah, I think in the job, you just learn how to—which one is a problem, and which one is not. How do—can I sit down in my cell to talk to him about this, just

him and I, because I trust that he's not doing anything, or do I have to be in the office to talk to him, or anything? So, I think about security and caring, that's something you learn, and that you have to decide. How are we talking together? How can—and where can we take this talk? And sometimes there is—we can't take the talk because the inmate is not ready for talking.

How much to talk—and where to talk—with prisoners was a concern frequently raised by staff negotiating the dual goals of normalization and security. In contexts where security was explicitly present, as in closed prison facilities with sectioned-off living areas, staff described having more opportunities to interact informally with prisoners, even sharing a cup of coffee. As one teacher explained, in closed prisons, classes were held in prisoners' housing units, creating a space for informal interaction: "Here, I'm at their home, you know … so the relation is easier and stronger I think because I can go and I can sit out in their living room, and have a cup of coffee in the afternoon." She went on to explain that she would chat with her students in the closed facility "about family, friends, and about school and education, and yeah, everything." As a result, she got to know them much better than in the open prison, where she had previously worked, and where students attended school in a designated building set apart from their housing units. Consequently, in her four years at the open prison, the teacher had never once been to a prisoner's housing unit. Somewhat paradoxically, the limits imposed on prisoners in closed prisons—facilities in which safety and security are a higher priority than in open prisons—actually facilitated the softer, normalization and resocialization aspects of this teacher's job. Simply "opening up" a prison, or providing exceptionally relaxed rules, might, in some cases, inhibit casual interactions between prisoners and staff.

Conversely, sub-dividing prisoners into groups (usually based on gang membership or status) and "sectioning" them into separate areas of the prison creates opportunities for casual interactions between prisoners and staff and individualized assessments, even if there are stricter limitations on freedom of interaction and movement. Indeed, the carceral goals of safety and security are paramount when dealing with prisoners who warrant extra restriction. As one guard and section leader[4] explained, "They're isolated in a way from the other inmates because they're too hard, too rough for normal inmates." Another guard described the strict limitations imposed on rival gang members, who need to be separated from each other, even within a given housing unit:

We can section the three halls in each floor … so then we have to go one hall at a time and go work, and then split them up. So, then it can be a lot of work when we've got those problems.

While sectioning is a prime example of safety and security—and a clear imposition of additional limits—the values of normalization and resocialization are not completely supplanted in restricted sections. One guard assigned to a section that housed gang members noted that, "It's not typical for me to sit down with them [gang members], but I remember I think a week, a month ago, sitting in the yard

with them and drinking coffee and eating their cake." This small interaction allows normalization to creep into a housing unit whose main purpose is safety and security, achieved through the imposition of additional limits. Another guard assigned to that same unit characterized the gang members within it fondly as "just boys—funny boys," with whom she could joke around, but she also emphasized the limits of socializing on the gang unit:

They cannot just walk up to the office here. They have to push the button to talk to us. A lot of the other sections are just walking around and can visit each other, and they can't do that here.

She went on to say that the gang members mostly socialize amongst themselves and keep separate from the guards. She explained, "Yeah, in the weekends, sometimes we just don't see them. We have to go down to the section and say, 'Hey are you awake? Are you alive! Oh, you're still here.'"

As a veteran guard explained to us on our first day at an open prison, "We don't take their personality; we don't take their rights. We only take their freedom, nothing else." But taking freedom is itself a complex process, involving imposing limits with regard to freedom of movement and interaction within the prison, as well as limits with regard to family relationships, such as restrictions on visits and phone calls. These limits on family relationships, in turn, create burdens on staff who can find themselves in the role of surrogate family or friends. One guard explained the maternal role in which prisoners cast her, quite apart from her own intentions:

Some of them call me Mom, yes, because I've got the age to be their mom. And they think I talk to them as their mom. . . .. And I feel like mom. I've got my own two kids at home, so I said to him, "I'm mom at home, and now I also feel mom here." And he looked at me and he said, "But you are my mom when I'm here." No, I'm not.

As this guard revealed, being cast in the role of surrogate mother imposed additional burdens on her ("I've got my own two kids") and inspired her to assert boundaries with prisoners ("No, I'm not [your mom]"). In other words, staff not only balance institutional normalization and security goals; they also balance familiarity and firmness in individual relationships.

Normalization, then, is just one of many competing goals of incarceration that co-exist in Danish prisons, as in other prisons across the world (Crewe, 2011; Liebling, 1999; Sykes, 1958/2007). Normalization, however, is also a tool that staff wield to achieve flexibility in imposing limits and negotiating multiple, cross-cutting goals of incarceration even within a single situation.

Limiting punishment and punishing limits

Prisoners frequently commented on aspects of their incarceration that correspond with Scandinavian Exceptionalism: the respect they receive from guards who call them by their first names as well as the rapport they have with them inside prison

and on home visits, their ability to cook their own meals, and the relative "softness" of imprisonment in general. Prisoners also described aspects of their incarceration that were less exceptional. In many cases, rather than characterizing these elements as "pains" of imprisonment born of sheer deprivation in the vein of Sykes (1958/2007), prisoners and staff alike tended to describe "limits" on freedom in general, both in terms of access to the outside world and of movement and decision making within the prison setting. Prisoners found limits to their autonomy, and especially to their freedom of movement and association, to be frustrating, chafing, and vexing (Sparks et al., 1996: 323; Sykes, 1958/2007), as well as "tight" and constraining (Crewe 2011: 522).

For instance, in describing the punishment he experiences, one prisoner detailed the limits to his autonomy inside the prison and his experience of exclusion from the world outside of it:

> I cannot do what I want. I cannot go on the Internet. I cannot have my mobile. A lot of TV channels I cannot see. I cannot have a beer with my friends. Go to a soccer game. A lot of things. You miss these small things you're going to miss, very much. [Like] McDonald's.

Sports, fast food, and the internet may seem like luxuries denied to prisoners everywhere. But this prisoner articulates more than simply a yearning for things no longer available to him ("you miss these small things"); he describes something other than the weight of deprivation (Downes, 1988). He experiences the absence of these "small things" as explicit limits to his own freedom and autonomy—a series of things he simply "cannot" do, because of institutional rules and regulations imposed by staff, rather than enjoyments that he cannot have.

Prisoners orient differently to limits in part because these limits are experienced differently across prisons, and even within a single facility. For instance, prisoners considered to be affiliated with gangs provided examples of heightened regulations, beginning with the separation and segregation of these groups within the prison discussed above, and extending to separation *from* these groups upon release from prison. One prisoner described this experience as "a little bit of an extra punishment":

> Every prison in Denmark is kind of okay. But you need your freedom for sure. And because we are a member of a biker group, there is a lot of rules for us. It's not like normal prison, like normal prisoners. Because when I go out, I have a known association. I cannot be with my friends for five years when I go out. So, I feel—I feel it's a little bit of an extra punishment for me. Because first when I go to court, they give me lifetime. And then the higher court put me down to sixteen years. And right now, I think, if they give me sixteen years [in prison] and they give me five years [upon release that] I cannot be with my friends or my club, it's like they give me 21 years. I have served my time, so why do they do this again? And what I think is wrong, when I'm sitting in here, I can only sit with bikers, Hell's Angels or Bandidos, not with other

people. But when I go outside, I cannot be – I can only be with normal people. How can that be?

Constraints on socializing with either other prisoners or fellow gang members was only one relational limit prisoners experienced as punitive. Many prisoners reported that missing their families was the hardest aspect of their incarceration—in spite of seemingly accommodating visiting policies, which permit prisoners to spend time with family members in private spaces on prison grounds (usually free of direct surveillance), for anywhere from a few hours to a few days at a time, and to conduct home visits accompanied by staff on some weekends. When asked what is hardest about being incarcerated, one prisoner noted: "You are not with your family, yeah. You are not with your family, and you don't got your freedom." For other prisoners, missing family combined with a sense of missing out more generally. For instance, one prisoner said:

> So, it's really hard for me because my best friend, he's going to get married now. He have a kid, and what I got? I got nothing. So. So, it's really hard for me to see my friends and my family grow, and get married, and get kids, and house, and all that kind of stuff. And me, I just sit here and do nothing. So, that's hard for me. So, I think a lot of people outside. So, I don't sleep so much at night.

Beyond these regular limits on freedom of movement and contact, prisoners experienced additional limits in response to rule violations. A prison guard in his second year of on-the-job training described the role of rules in controlling prisoners' daily activities:

> Of course, maybe some of the inmates would say that it's tough because they are not used to that there's so much control over them . . . [outside of prison] we have rule, but they can go outside the rule. And in here, the rule is the rule. And if I have said no, then it's no. We are not discussing it anymore. You have get my reason why I am saying no . . . So, from my point of view, I think they have it good. But [I am] also aware . . . it can be hard for them, because we are controlling so much of the day.

In his discussion of the importance of limits, this guard also elucidated the tension between a "normal" life, where prisoners have autonomy in daily activities, and the need for prison staff to impose rules and limits, which prisoners have little choice but to follow. Thus, for this guard, imposing limits on prisoners actually undermines the ideal of normalization. Further, it undercuts the goal of resocialization, by allowing prisoners to abdicate responsibility for themselves. As one section leader explained: "I think some of them [prisoners] are very happy for limits. . . . They don't have to take responsibility for themselves and so on, so they like limits." But the guard added, "[F]or others, it's the worst. They're free birds, and now they're here with strange limits they feel."

The process used in open prisons, when prisoners report that they will not be coming to work for the day, reveals this tension between responsibilization and freedom. Under prison rules, a prisoner's "choice" not to work prompts a prison-imposed consequence that comes in various forms, depending on the facility or staff member responding: confinement to a separate "workroom" where prisoners are required to stay for the duration of the day in lieu of work, "voluntary isolation" in a specially designated cell, or confinement to one's own cell. One guard working at an open prison explained the ostensibly non-punitive nature of these "work rooms," while simultaneously acknowledging their punitive potential:

> Respondent:We have some cells. And cells is not the correct word. But if people don't want to work today, they can come to us and we have some rooms. We have free rooms behind us where they can come over and they can sit in the working hour.
>
> Interviewer: And this is allowed?
>
> Respondent: Only if they don't want to. So, as a kind of punish, instead of they are sitting at home where they have TV and a lot of channels. They come over [here] and there's nothing.
>
> Interviewer: Ah, no TVs.
>
> Respondent:No nothing. So, they can come over and sit there until their work is finished. And then behind those again we have four rooms where people who are being punished for something which is not allowed in here. And that could be they have smoked weed or taken cocaine, or they have done something outside which is not allowed. So, they can sit down there between three to fourteen days. So, those we have to give food, breakfast, lunch, dinner.

At first, the guard hedges in calling this space a "cell," referring to it alternatively as a room where someone "can sit" instead of working. But he goes on to explain that this does serve as a "kind of punish[ment]," because it limits prisoners' access to TV. In this case, "there's nothing." The physical arrangement of these rooms is telling. The four rooms directly behind the temporary "work rooms," which were nearly identical in size and layout to the work rooms, were isolation cells used to punish rule violations for periods of up to two weeks.

This Danish open prison, then, has varied forms of enclosures for limiting and controlling prisoners' autonomy. Though outsiders laud these open prisons for their lack of fences and permissiveness, upon closer examination, in certain fundamental ways, they resemble many other late modern prisons: simultaneously limiting freedom and enforcing expectations that prisoners exercise "free" will to act in conformity with institutional—and societal—rules (Crewe, 2011; Sexton, 2015). This contradictory state of affairs exists in a system that, while based on principles of normalization and socialization, remains first and foremost a system

of penal confinement. On the one hand, this is unsurprising: prisons confine. On the other hand, many Danish staff members said to us that prisoners are in prison "as punishment," not "for punishment," in other words, not to receive additional punishment. But our findings reveal that prisoners nonetheless experience their incarceration as limiting, at least as much as normalizing and socializing.

Discussion

Our work sheds light on the complexity of the lived experience of punishment belied by the sleek contours of Scandinavian Exceptionalism. Within the boundaries of both open and closed prisons, prisoners experience distance from normalcy, deprivations of liberty and autonomy, and limits in many forms. Rather than emphasizing the deprivations of incarceration, we orient towards punishment as limitations. This is consistent with the relatively permeable boundaries of Danish prisons—permeability that is evident socially and culturally, even in closed prisons with secure perimeters. Because most Danish prisoners are not wholly deprived of contact with, or trappings of, the outside world, they are confronted with limits to their freedom, to interactions with the free world, and to their autonomy within the prison, rather than the more obvious pains of imprisonment that result from stark, US-style carceral deprivation. Moreover, Denmark's frequent use of isolation imposes additional limits, and these limits come with deprivations not dissimilar to those seen in the US or even, in moderated form, in the UK.

Rather than being exceptionally, uniformly humane, Danish prisons reveal a nuanced penal landscape in which prisoners experience the limits of incarceration, and staff are tasked with calibrating these limits to achieve multiple objectives. This landscape resembles that of prisons in the US, especially. There too, prisoners feel the limits of incarceration; and there too, staff are tasked with balancing competing values and goals. As Logan (1993: 23–24) notes,

We ask an awful lot of prisons.... We ask them to take over where other institutions of society have failed and to reinforce norms that have been violated and rejected. We ask them to pursue so many different and often incompatible goals that they seem virtually doomed to fail.

This "ask" is true, although to varying degrees, of prisons across the globe. Denmark's exceptionalism lies not in the wholehearted humanity of its system, but in its active engagement with the competing demands of incarceration.

Penal systems' approaches to these competing goals vary considerably across the globe. Sykes's (1958/2007: 14) "regime of the custodians" serves as a reminder that we must orient to the prison as a regime in which "the rules and routines of the prison officials represent a choice among alternative means and we must examine the basis of this choice as well as the objectives themselves." Macro-level explanations that focus on objectives, purposes, or intentions of punishment easily overlook choices made on the ground—choices to privilege certain goals while relegating others to the periphery. A closer look at the micro-level detail inside

prisons allows us to examine the particular blend of goals as well as the lived experiences that these choices produce.

The underlying value of normalization rests precisely upon the permeability of the boundaries of Danish prisons. Yet re-creating an otherwise normal environment in an institutional setting defined by a boundary between itself and the outside world does not achieve normalization, but mere facsimile. This somewhat banal observation nonetheless re-focuses our perspective on Danish prisons as punitive spaces, regardless of the efforts made by guards to joke with prisoners, or efforts made by institutions to eliminate gratuitous deprivations. The Scandinavian Exceptionalism literature glosses over the primary purpose of prisons as punishment (or, more specifically, as a limitation to autonomy), allowing a particularly rosy image of the system to emerge. While this picture is not wholly inaccurate, neither it is complete.

An exclusive emphasis on normalization and resocialization implies (or perhaps presumes) the absence of more restrictive elements. Likewise, a focus only on the punitive function of Danish prisons, in order to demonstrate departures from the exceptionalism thesis, is potentially, similarly misleading. Instead, our findings reveal a dynamic negotiation of values, goals, and limits that determine prisoners' experiences of incarceration. To the extent that security goals are prioritized over resocialization and normalization, prisoners feel the limitations, pains, and punishments of incarceration even more acutely (see also Reiter et al., 2017). This is surprising only because of the aspirations, of both normalization and Scandinavian Exceptionalism, that such limitations and pains might be further, or even completely, eroded.

Nil Christie (1981: 1) once observed that

> [I]mposing punishment within the institution of law means the inflicting of pain, intended as pain. This is an activity which often comes in dissonance to esteemed values such as kindness and forgiveness. To reconcile these incompatibilities, attempts are sometimes made to hide the basic character of punishment.

Taken to its logical extreme, the Scandinavian Exceptionalism thesis implies that punishment, if delivered humanely, can be virtually devoid of all but the self-imposed, existential pain of accepting responsibility (Pratt, 2008a; Larson, 2013). Vaunting Scandinavian prisons as bastions of humanity and dignity permits observers to gloss over the discomfort and pain inherent to the negotiated order of punishment in Danish prisons (see also Simon, 2014). The simplicity of Scandinavian Exceptionalism—as with many other macro-level explanations of punitivity—lies at the heart of its appeal. But such macro theories skim over the contradictions of punishment and humanity, of normalization and limitation, reproduced on the ground through interactions between staff and prisoners. When this veil is lifted, however, we are left to grapple with the juxtaposition and messiness inherent in our systems of punishment—without the aspirational moral high ground of the Scandinavian ideal.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. "Open" prisons in Denmark are campus-style facilities with no secure perimeter. Prisoners are often permitted to leave prison grounds during the day for work, education or healthcare, and on the weekends for overnight visits with family. "Closed" prisons have secure perimeters, and prisoners only leave these facilities with a staff escort. Denmark currently has eight open and seven closed prisons.
2. Of those prisoners who did not identify as Danish, other nationalities and ethnicities included Central and Eastern European, North African, and Middle Eastern.
3. This excludes the six focus group participants.
4. Section leaders are guards charged with overseeing a designated housing unit or analogous section of the prison, including supervision of prisoners and management of staff.

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