

Taking Greenwich University students to visit HMP Wandsworth

A collaborative, reflective piece written with the students.

Dr Ed Schreeche-Powell*, Dr Jack Tomlin, Brittanie Noon, Emma Hole, Cecilie Wicklund, Oana-Alexandra Sauca, Jade Hudson, Valeria Rossi and Asya Mitisheva. *University of Greenwich*

Recently, a team of lecturers and students from a Forensic Mental Health module at the University of Greenwich visited HMP Wandsworth where we experienced first-hand the safer custody and mental health provision in this busy remand prison. This proved to be a powerful experience for those in attendance. In what follows below, we have come together to reflect on the experience and how it influences our perspectives across the discipline of criminology.

Relational Safety and the Importance of Reflective Practice: Dr Jack Tomlin

When I started this piece, I wrote: “It is easy to become inured to the peculiar spaces that are prisons and secure settings”. I felt that although these places are difficult to work and live in, you grow used to them quickly: their walls, locks, noises, barbed wire, cameras, security guards. As I reflected further, I realised this was wrong. I didn’t grow used to prisons and secure settings quickly and easily. It wasn’t a case of simply needing to grow comfortable within these spaces to work on my PhD research.

I took steps to overcome anxieties I had about being in confined places where people are deprived of their liberty. In my efforts to fit in and feel comfortable in these settings, I downplayed the emotional strain that accompanied many of my early visits to secure hospitals. I started coping in strange ways, even leaning into what I thought would be a tough persona, eschewing what is my more naturally inquisitive side in favour of one portraying knowledge, confidence, and control. These coping mechanisms belied the emotional labour, constructing a kind of straw figure to absorb concerns around safety, fitting in, risk, competency.

So, when my colleague, Ed, raised the prospect of taking 15 Forensic Mental Health students to HMP Wandsworth, I thought, “Oh great idea! This will be a fantastic visit.” I naturally considered security and safety for our students. I thought about what might happen during a critical incident, how we’d move around, or if they’d request personal alarms. But this was *procedural* and *physical* security. Once again—consciously or not—I neglected to consider adequately *relational* security: the interpersonal and emotional components of safety. It was not until we sat outside a pub immediately after the visit, taking in a bright Spring sun, that I absorbed that our students just had the same emotionally and intellectually vivid experience I once had.

Penal theorist Gresham Sykes (1958, p63) famously articulated that “each man brings to the custodial institution his own needs and his background and each man takes away from the

prison his own interpretation of life within the walls". Accordingly, we encouraged our students to reflect further on their experiences.

'Ex-Prisoner, Prison Re-entry': Dr Ed Schreeche-Powell

There is literature that discusses *prisoner* re-entry to society; however, this was an opportunity for *prison* re-entry. The prison visit was one that saw me return to what I sometimes view as a past life, and a past identity. It marked the first time that I had returned to a prison since I was released over 3 ½ years ago. I had spent over 20% of my life in prison at the time of my release – all served as one sentence. During that time, I had crafted a new identity, first as a student but now as an academic with a doctorate lecturing at university in Criminology and Psychology.

The self is not a passive, rigid concept and as such is in a constant flux of shaping through interaction and interpretations of our social environment, the influence of other people and institutions. As individuals we 'act to promote the self, developing a narrative of who we are, who we have been and who we plan to become' (Nicolson, 2018, p31). The mechanism of reflexivity helps us to work out our position in a range of contexts, both in the short- and long-term. As an active and responsive social agent, I am continuing to make sense of my social world and myself longitudinally, which involves processing and reflecting upon information about my life and its contexts, managing 'the story that I tell myself of who I am and project it to those around me' (Nicolson, 2018, p31).

Exposure to the mechanisms of the penal establishment, especially for those on long sentences, can spoil positive former identities based around legitimate roles. Offenders face the prospect of losing the roles that 'locate themselves within the social world' (Jewkes 2005, p 369) and can be left with simply the identity of prisoner (Hughes, 2009). Prison education allowed me to develop skills and qualities which "may help to reduce the tarnish of an identity blemished and 'spoiled' through [my] criminal conviction" (Hughes, 2009).

During our visit to Wandsworth, aspects of prison life came flooding back—the hyper vigilance and hyper awareness that accompanied me during my imprisonment—yet not as threatening or insecurity provoking as whilst a prisoner: they were more of an undercurrent as I was enacting my academic identity (Schreeche-Powell, 2019, 2020).

Student Reflections

Anticipation and Expectations

Affective forecasting refers to the prediction of one's future emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Research has shown that we engage in affective forecasting when predicting not just positive emotions, like happiness, but also negative emotions, such as hostility and loneliness (Wenze, Gunthert, & German, 2012). Here we share the diversity of our expectations ahead of the prison visit:

“We have all studied prison environments and architecture and have a personal belief about how the system works based on our studies. However, one thing is studying it in the book, and another is going there and seeing it with my own eyes,” (Oana-Alexandra Sauca)

“I had some particular expectations about the atmosphere and what I expected to see and feel there. I remember I said that I am expecting to feel the weight of the walls on me, to sense the isolation from the outside world, and the feeling of lost privacy. Now, I can say that I felt all of it, plus so much more.” (Asya Mitisheva)

“While for some students, this was their first time in a prison environment, I have volunteered at a prison previously. By doing so, many anxieties typically felt on an initial prison visit were alleviated. Going into Wandsworth, my main interest was taking a more comparative approach between the nature of this, and the previous prison I visited.” (Jade Hudson)

The Realities of Prison vs Hyper-reality

“Watching documentaries and reading about prison cells does not fully capture the reality of the size and atmosphere in prison. The profound realisation when seeing the tiny prison cells and limited space available first-hand is a difficult realisation to replicate through other means.” (Cecilie Wicklund,)

“What shocked me the most was how non-threatening the whole experience felt. Perhaps I had built prisons and prison guards up in my head to be more intimidating and scary than they actually are. I had expected people who work in prisons to be intimidating and threatening, but everyone we met was really friendly.” (Emma Hole)

Sensory Overload

‘The very contestability of social science suggests that its objects of knowledge are not simple reflections of naturally occurring events, but that social science creates its own objects by a process of theoretical and ... practical relevance and reflections’ (Garland and Young, 1983:2). “Cold and eerie, with such tension and feelings of hopelessness that will forever live in my memory. The prison was not loud and violent but carried a deafening silence where emotions of anger and despair draped over my body, feelings which seemed to be absorbed in the very walls that confined the prisoners. Stepping inside the prison cell, the walls begin to feel as if they are closing in; the reality of being deprived of freedom almost feels like a suffocating weight positioned directly on your chest.” (Brittanie Noon)

“Once inside I saw the place was very dark and sad. There was no air coming inside, I honestly could not wait to get out from that place. The cells were extremely small for two people and there was a small window in which air did not even come through. I tried to stay inside the cell for 3 minutes to see how I would feel to be there, but I cannot imagine how these people can stay 23 hours locked inside that small cell.” (Valeria Rossi)

“The lack of privacy hit me when I first entered the prison cell. As we are young women, the experience of a high degree of intimacy forced upon us, squeezing past each other to move around, led me to reflect on the psychological impact of such conditions on grown men, who easily are twice the size of us. It is a sobering experience when a prison cell's psychological impacts wash over you, even when you only spent a minute inside it.” (Emma Hole)

Prison as a Fruitless Endeavour

“We live in a society that has forgotten how to forgive. Incarceration is an experiment that has failed because the system never looks at prisoners who should get care or should never lose their dignity and the criminal justice system is not providing the care that those prisoners need. The CJS is just punishing them, and this is why prisons are places where prisoners worsen their mental well-being.” (Valeria Rossi)

“Prisons are not made to produce change; they were designed to punish and nothing truly good can happen by locking people up when other means might be more productive for the benefit of society.” (Asya Mitisheva)

“Reflecting on the stress that the mental health system is under in prison environments and, although there have been positive developments, I believe this wing and wings in other prisons should be able to accommodate more individuals who require support, which often is not available for all who need it.” (Jade Hudson)

Challenging Perception, Fuelled by Experience: Prison as a place of hope?

There are some key considerations our students took away. Although power is often associated with coercive applications, good power can achieve positive outcomes in custodial settings if utilised with the intent to improve safety and quality of life (Schreeche-Powell, 2020, Foucault, 1977).

“Very positive impression of the prison’s personnel we had the pleasure to talk to. I was particularly impressed by the young lady who did not allow the routine and old traditions to break her will to make a change and deliver a more holistic approach to the inmates, and their needs as human beings, behind the label ‘prisoners’.” (Asya Mitisheva)

“Learnt that the people who work in prisons are just people too. Most of them want to help the prisoners, be it to inspire them to change their life around once they get out or by making their life on the inside easier. The guards we met showed a strong level of empathy and understanding that the situation these men live in is not normal and to treat them as normal people means a lot to them.” (Emma Hole)

We left Wandsworth with a mixture of sadness, despair, pain, and frustration but also hope and aspirations to support better opportunities, conditions and outcomes for those who are imprisoned or who may be in future. A truly profound personal and educational experience.

**For more information about this work, please contact Edwin Schreeche-Powell:*

e.schreechepowell@greenwich.ac.uk

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