*prison*HEALTH EXTERNAL SPEAKER (March 2021)

Professor Ben Crewe, Cambridge University

"Top bunk, bottom bunk: the indignities of cell-sharing"

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***prison*HEALTH**

'Prisons, Health and Societies' is a new, multidisciplinary research group which exists to encourage high quality scholarship, engagement and knowledge transfer regarding all aspects of mental and physical health, in and around prisons and detention sites. The prisonHEALTH arm is co-directed by Dr Philippa Tomczak and Dr Catherine Appleton. Developing our flourishing series of internal seminars, we warmly welcomed our second external speaker Professor Ben Crewe from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge on the 25th March 2021, who presented his co-authored paper "Top bunk, bottom bunk: the indignities of cell-sharing" (Crewe and Schliehe, forthcoming).

Ben Crewe is Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice and Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. His research interests span almost all aspects of prison life but in particular the prisoner experience, prison social life and culture and penal power. Crewe's current research projects include a six year £2 million ESRC funded study entitled 'Penal policy making and the prisoner experience: a comparative analysis'.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

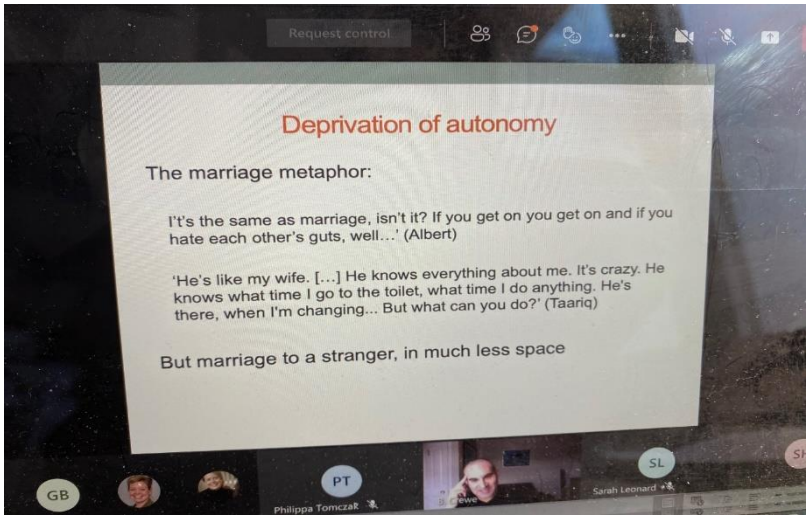
"Top bunk, bottom bunk: the indignities of cell-sharing"

Crewe's co-authored paper "Top bunk, bottom bunk: the indignities of cell-sharing", presented to the PrisonerHealth audience, draws upon the findings from his ethnographic and qualitative ESRC funded comparative prison study. In this paper Crewe solely focuses on prisoners' lived experiences of cell-sharing in England and Wales (all of the following information pertains to prisoners in this jurisdiction).

The context

Crewe firstly provided an overview of the extent of cell sharing in our prisons – 32,000 prisoners (38.8% of the prison population) share a cell (February 2020). Whilst high security prisoners do not share a cell and female prisoners rarely share a cell, most male prisoners incarcerated in local prisons do share a cell. In comparison cell-sharing in Norway is uncommon and many international prison oversight organisations discourage joint cells. Prisoners do not get to select who they share a cell with – prison staff upon initial cell allocation conduct a cell risk assessment on each prisoner but there is little scope (due to capacity limitations and concerns regarding exploitation) to make a decision about who shares a cell based on compatibility.

The (in)dignity of involuntary cell-sharing is an important factor in prisoners' experiences of prison. Little research has explored the lived experience of the shared cell and Crewe argued that the cell is one of the primary sites of 'where the action is' in prisons, and where matters of safety, dignity and abjection are of particular relevance. Crewe, citing Drake (2018: 5) highlighted how prison research has tended to 'downplay the profound painfulness associated with the loss of liberty and autonomy, dismissing its importance on the basis that it is an obvious and accepted side-effect of the practice of imprisonment'. A shared cell is not confined to just the sharing of a space but to the sharing of physical and psychological intimacies. Prisoners eat, sleep and defecate within the four walls of this confined and forced shared space – where the intimacies of cell-sharing are more invasive than other co-habiting scenarios such as marriage.



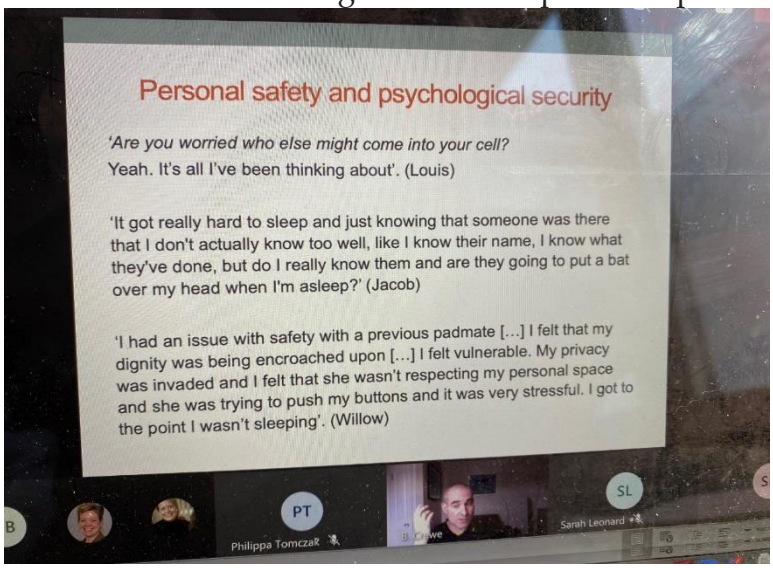
Drawing upon Goffman's 1961 seminal work 'Asylums', Crewe described how the intimacy of cell sharing – a space where there is no legal minimum area in England and Wales but in Scotland the minimum space for a shared cell is set at 4.5 square metres per prisoner – means that 'the inmate is

never fully alone'. Inmates have to manage the 'difficulties of sharing space with others that … could otherwise [be] avoid[ed]'. Crewe referred to Fludernik's (2019) and Goffman's (1961) research when he described to *Prison*HEALTH how sharing the confined space of a cell does not provide the 'intimate locus of personal space [which] safeguard[s] the inmate's physical integrity' (Fludernik, 2019: 7) or the 'backstage' space (Goffman, 1961) through which a prisoner can carve some space and time – to have some privacy. The pains and indignity and profound practices of humanity are shaped and influenced by the intimacy of the shared cell.

The fieldwork

Crewe then presented the key themes that emerged from the 278 prisoner interviews that he and his team conducted across five establishments. Prisoners (who cell-shared) experienced: deprivation of autonomy; deprivation of privacy; enforced intimacy and contamination; and issues of personal safety and psychological security. To manage the pains of cell-sharing prisoners had developed solo and joint strategies and a range of cell-sharing norms.

Prisoners who cell share are subjected to a deprivation of autonomy and privacy through having to involuntarily share a cell and having to share physical and psychological intimacies. Prisoners described how they had to try to conceal their emotions and that having to deal with one another's (sometimes) intense emotions was a strain. Many made graphic references of the smells and sounds of washing, defecating and sleeping in such close proximity. Being involuntarily confined in a cell with another person led, for some, to feelings of anxiety – feeling unsafe. Crewe illustrated these findings with direct prisoner quotes – one prisoner wondered whether 'they [cellmate] are going to put a bat over my head when I'm asleep?'. Crewe argued that these personal safety and psychological security concerns can result in trauma and persistent fear. One prisoner voiced the trauma and fear that he had experienced through the process of cell-sharing. He



stated that his cellmate 'broke me psychologically'.

Examples of the strategies and norms that prisoners developed to cope with sharing such an intimate and confined space included: defence of space and property through specific ways of concealing one's personal items or putting on a defensive or threatening performance to intimidate your cellmate; micro politics of intimate diplomacy such as turning away and turning up the TV volume whilst your cell-mate uses the toilet; make-shift curtains to provide some visual privacy; not acknowledging when the other male prisoner was crying; and the hierarchy of the bottom bunk. The bottom bunk denotes power and is a status. He who has bottom bunk has the power over all the decisions made within the cell. Prisoners move up the hierarchical bunk ladder when the top bunk prisoner is moved or released. Crewe shared moving exceptions to this rule from the research, for example, a prisoner who had a new, elderly and infirm padmate, so he relinquished his usual right to the bottom bunk, to enable the new arrival to get in and out of bed with ease and dignity.

Crewe concluded that these deprivations, strategies and norms of cell-sharing determine a prisoner's overall experience of prison. The micro-politics of survival and the choreographed rituals are all matters of dignity and what it means to be a person of moral worth. Crewe outlined that whilst many international organisations discourage cell-sharing being on your own in a cell could in itself be a risk factor. Sharing may in fact be desirable but not in the current conditions in cells of many of England and Wales prisons.

*Prison*HEALTH attendees were then given the opportunity to ask questions. Questions and discussions focused on the impact the cell (and prison) architecture and materiality had on prisoners' experiences of cell-sharing, the impact of the experience of cell-sharing on prisoners post-release, the impact for long-term prisoners of having to share their cell space with a continuous cycle of short-term sentenced prisoners. A final discussion focussed on the dissemination plans for the research.

To conclude, Crewe's paper was an emotive and in-depth insight into the daily lived experience of cell-sharing and the impact of sharing physical and psychological intimacies within such a confined space. Crewe, through verbatim prisoner accounts, illustrated how the intimacy of the shared cell shapes and influences the profound practices of humanity. The experience of cell sharing is one of the pains of imprisonment that leads to prisoners developing and adopting a set of norms and strategies as coping mechanisms to deal with the imposed intimacy.

Our appreciation and thanks to Ben Crewe for such an insightful and interesting presentation.

References

Crewe, B. and Schliehe, A. (forthcoming) Top bunk, bottom bunk: the experience of cell-sharing in prisons

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Fludernik,M. (2019) *Metaphors of Confinement: The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy.* Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Goffman, E. (1961/1991) *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. London: Penguin Books.

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