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‘Finding beauty’ in French rural prisons. How prison officers operate rurality

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The literature on rural criminology and rural prisons has so far essentially focused on debunking myths about rurality and rural crimes, and on the economic and social impacts of building prisons in rural areas. Typically, such rural prisons are recent. Conversely, due to its long history, France’s rural prisons have in some cases been built during the 19th century within former convents from the Middle Ages or monasteries confiscated from the church during the 1789 Revolution. Missing from this literature, therefore, is, on the one hand, a focus on historic rural prison settings and, on the other hand, attention to individuals and professionals who work there. This paper focuses on a high security prison set in a middle-ages abbey in the middle of nature. In our interviews with its prison officers (POs) we used appreciative inquiry in order to better uncover the positive dimensions of rurality. We find that rurality is used to reinforce safety and the ‘right distance’ with prisoners, and to better cut off from the prison environment when they finish their shift. We also find that POs are bound by strong (rural) family ties that in turn contribute to their professional identity and values, and to their feelings of safety.

Keywords: prisons, prison officers, professional identity, rurality



Introduction

With a few exceptions (e.g. Chantraine, 2010; Cliquennois, 2013), international journals have seldom published papers focusing on French prisons, even less so on rural prisons (but see Combessie, 1998).

Yet – and starting in 1987 with a ‘Prison Public Service Act’ – France has also been developing its own prison migration to the country (Herzog-Evans, 2009) by semi-privatising (Thibault, 1995) the building and maintenance of new prisons, themselves largely located in rural areas. Such a trend has also been seen in the United States (e.g. Farringan & Glasmeier, 2003) although for reasons that differ significantly from those driving it in France. A first difference is that French prisons have faced chronic overcrowding (Urvoas, 2016). Prison overcrowding has been only partly related to punitive policies since such policies have not gone nearly as far as the US’s ‘tough on crime’ policies, notably due to the influence of European rights institutions and laws (Snacken & Dumortier, 2012) and their authority over French laws and normative sovereignty (Cliquennois & Herzog-Evans, 2018). A second and more obvious reason why France has exported its semi-privatised prisons to the country is prosaic: rural land is significantly cheaper (Herzog-Evans, 2009). Nonetheless, in France, the potential positive economic benefits for rural areas were an added bonus, even though they were not in the least central.

Moreover, due to its long history, in the case of France, the temporal dimension is more complex. A number of rural prisons are not recent, but centuries old; they may have been built during the 19th century within former convents from the Middle Ages or monasteries confiscated from the church during the 1789 Revolution.

Another important issue is that the literature, as we shall now see, has seldom focused on prison staff, and particularly on the prison officers (hereafter POs) who work in rural prisons. Yet, many questions may come to mind: What does a rural environment add to their experience? And, what role does rurality play in the way POs conceptualise their profession?

The extant literature

In researching relevant literature for this study, we were struck by its rather narrow focus on US-related lines of questioning and subject matter. As well, we found very few articles that directly addressed how POs negotiate their life in a rural prison, whether in the U.S.A., in France, and elsewhere in Europe.

To help us ground this paper theoretically, three research domains were explored in depth. The first is general rural criminology. This emerging strand of literature is set within the framework of sociological criminology and, essentially, is influenced by left realism, following in Evans’ (1992) footsteps, and critical criminology (e.g. Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). It generally focuses on crimes in rural areas, notably domestic violence (e.g. Rennison et al., 2012). It also addresses the myth of a ‘rural-urban’ dichotomy (Tönnies, 1955; Wirth, 1938), wherein rural areas are deemed pure and protected from crime, as

opposed to 'crime-infested' urban areas, as a result of 'social disorganisation' (Sampson & Groves, 1989). For instance, Hogg and Carrington (2003) have shown that there is actually more violence in rural areas; not less, whilst French researchers have established that France's countryside is fast becoming a large drug market (Cadet-Taïrou et al., 2010).

Following in the footsteps of Weisheit et al (1995), Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014) were among the first to extract a rigorous criminology from these myths about rurality. What is missing, as DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz (2014) suggest themselves, are studies about other parts of the world that they – amusingly – term 'obscure' (p. 98). Admittedly, if one understands this adjective in its literal sense, such is the case of French rural prisons.

Also missing from these studies is attention to how prison practitioners negotiate and integrate rurality into their daily personal and professional lives. We nonetheless want to situate our current study within the wider framework of criminology, that is, as a truly multidisciplinary science (cf. Frodeman et al., 2017). This is why we turned next to prison studies and their focus on POs (Chauvenet et al., 1994); their culture (Crewe et al., 2011); their emotions (Crawley, 2004a; Crewe et al., 2014); their professional stress (Dowden & Tellier, 2004); the trauma they might have to endure (Carleton et al., 2018; Herzog-Evans, 2015b); their values (Griffin et al., 2005); their socialisation (Benguigui et al., 2008); and the private-professional life dichotomy (Crawley, 2004b). Sociology oriented researchers have tried to envision PO typologies: 'punitive-ritualistic'; 'could not care less-indifferent'; 'educators-psychologist', and 'fair-conformist' (Montandon & Crettez, 1981); 'Pollyana', 'white-hat', 'conformist burnouts' (Kaufman, 1988); 'institutional and missionaries' (Rostaing, 1994); or 'turnkeys and carers' (Tait, 2008), and so on. These characterisations suggest that POs might react differently to similar situations; alas, the literature has done little to explain, in our case, how practitioners perceive rurality.

Conversely (and of particular interest to us), researchers have also studied dimensions such as: how to manage stress via a cut-off between prison life and private life (Chauvenet et al., 1994; Crawley, 2004b), and how to maintain an appropriate distance from prisoners (Herzog-Evans, 2015a). Again, though, none of these publications has focused on rurality *per se*, nor have they addressed the intersectionality of these issues with rurality.

Focusing on a historical French high-security prison, this study will therefore add to the literature in a number of ways. It will not be situated within the left realist movement or within any particular critical movement. Our goal, and our stance, as much as possible, has been that of neutral observers and emotional receptacles. We hasten to say that we do not object to critical stances but our own wish was to detect the more positive side of the coin. Another difference is that our study is situated in a francophone context. The French sociology of prisons has been particularly prolific over the last three decades but has been largely ignored due to the language barrier. Our goal in this respect is to help reduce this ignorance. Additionally, the prison we studied, other than being rural and being a high security institution, is located in a Middle Ages monastery which was turned into a prison in the 19th century. Unlike many of the prisons studied in the aforementioned literature, it is steeped in history.

We then turned our attention to the literature on rural prisons, since the prison we studied is located in the middle of the French countryside. We found, however, that much of this literature pertains to economic or community aspects of a rural location, and that it is mostly related to the U.S. context. Most authors have focused their attention on issues of mass incarceration, with rurality acting as a receptacle. These researchers' main argument is thus a critique, and legitimately so, of 'tough on crime' policies, of race discrimination, of poverty management (Eason, 2010), and of neo-liberalism (e.g. Bonds, 2009). Other authors have studied the impact of rural prisons on local economies and discussed whether, economically and socially, they have had a positive impact (Abrams & Lyons, 1987), little impact (Farringan & Glasmeier, 2003; Glasmeier & Farringan, 2007), or some level of negative impact (Genter, Hooks, & Mosher, 2013). Others have focused on communities' reactions to the siting of prisons in rural areas with, typically, two types of responses: Not in My Backyard (NIMBY); or Please in My Backyard (PIMBY; Eason, 2017). Again, this literature does not address individual-level reactions or the prison staff's perspective.

By exception, the French literature – albeit in a limited number of publications – has addressed subjects more directly related to our considerations. The first author (Herzog-Evans, 1998) and Combessie (1996; see also Milhaud, 2009, 2014) posited a continuity of prisons' internal and external spaces, in the latter case, the community (whether rural or not). Combessie (1996) has studied the surrounding milieu of the prison, the local cafés (one for prison officers, one for the inmates' families) and found that, in rural areas POs are better able to manage the paradoxical professional constraints of complying fully with the regulations while being sufficiently flexible to better maintain order, which the first author also confirmed (Herzog-Evans, 1998).

Combessie (1996) has additionally noticed that POs use rurality as a cut-off point after their shift, by hunting, fishing, cutting wood, and so on. However, he did not go beyond this observation. Lastly, he pointed to POs' dynasties, working one generation to the next in historic rural prisons and to the ease with which, contrary to urban areas, POs could be seen in their uniform. He also pointed to more negative dimensions such as how staying put in the same prison because of personal attachment to the locality, negatively impacted their career progression.

We wanted to revisit one of the high-security prisons that Combessie (1996) had initially studied. Firstly, in the 25 years that have passed, the prison landscape has dramatically changed, particularly in the form of opposite movements towards both a 'prison of rights' and a more punitive stance, gaining momentum since the recent terrorist attacks on French soil (Herzog-Evans, 2019). Secondly, whereas the aforementioned studies have pertained to *new* prisons being *inaugurated* in rural territories, we were asked to work in a centuries-old rural prison that was about to *close* following a Ministry of Justice decision. We wanted to document one last time how rurality had worked out for this particular prison. Moreover, while Combessie (1996) had analysed the impact of the rural environment on power relations in prisons, our objective was to explore the function of rurality in the fluidification of PO/prisoner relations.

For this study, we had a series of research questions touching upon: POs' attitudes towards the law and towards legal constraints; PO work-related trauma; and POs' values. However, as part of our study, other themes later emerged, in particular, that of rurality, which we explore in the present paper.

Methodology

We were acting on the basis of a request from the Ministry of Justice of France. Following the decision to close the high-security prison we studied (hereafter The Abbey), for disputable and largely contested political reasons – and fearing class-based actions or movements – the Ministry thought it would be a good idea to give a voice to the POs. The task we were assigned was not so much to allow POs to express their bitterness about the closing of The Abbey but, in essence – as we came to put it for short – 'to download POs' unique professional experience' in such a historical setting.

For this study, we used a themed qualitative interview grid that the first author had developed in 2011 for a previous investigation on French POs (Herzog-Evans, 2015a, 2015b). Using this tool, the questions were categorised into domains, each corresponding to one of the values uncovered by Liebling in *Prison and their moral performance* (2005) and her further studies. This questionnaire also aimed at emulating her use of appreciative inquiry in prison settings (e.g. Liebling et al., 1999). This method, which had yielded particularly rich results in Herzog-Evans's initial study, also seemed very appropriate if the goal was indeed to 'download' everything there was to know about The Abbey's POs, as it focuses on the positive. In this sense, appreciative inquiry is – so to speak – the grandchild of positive psychology (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003).

For this study, with the active help of criminal justice students, we conducted semi-onsite directive interviews. We were authorised to tape record the interviews, which allowed us to be more flexible and to more readily create rapport with the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then shared amongst us. To code our data, we had an initial list of themes. However, as more interviews were produced, other themes started emerging. We first focused on the initial issues we had set to work on (values, emotions, history, trauma etc.), but rapidly started noticing the importance of rurality as a separate theme.

We interviewed 19 POs, 4 senior prison officers with various ranks, a former prison governor along with the current one, a teacher, and an 80-year-old retired PO. All interviews, naturally, were voluntary-based and total anonymity was guaranteed by our team for the practitioners. A great number of precautions were taken to safeguard this anonymity along with the safety of our data.

Our sample essentially comprised male officers (85%), which is representative of the overall PO population. The average age, if one excludes the retired 80-year-old PO, was 46. In this particular prison, the average of their professional experience was 16 years. This means that, as in the 2011 study conducted by the first author, we interviewed POs with years of experience. This time around, it was not because we chose to restrict our interviews to POs

with lengthier careers. Rather, it is because it is generally experienced POs who work in high-security prisons. Also, as we shall see, in this particular prison, POs remain at their posts for a very long time. Significantly, 70% of all interviewees had a rural background. With the exception of three of them, they were all in a relationship and had children.

But for the retiree, all participants were interviewed during their shift; if initially they expressed the desire to talk to us for a short duration only, interviews were kept brief (they eventually all ended up talking to us for a very long time). Appreciative inquiry, as it was in the 2011 study, was a remarkable technique which allowed us to obtain exceptionally intimate, emotional, and original material. It is in this context that the theme of rurality, which was not part of our initial list of subjects, gradually sprung to our attention.

Nonetheless, such a method has obvious limitations. Qualitative in nature, the results cannot be generalisable. Interview-based, it lacks the depth which an ethnographic study would have provided. An added limitation is that we recruited our respondents on a voluntary basis and using a 'snowball' method (a PO who had a positive experience in the interview would help us convince a colleague of his to also participate, and so on). It is nevertheless in line with the aims of appreciative inquiry. As a matter of fact, after their interviews had taken place, many POs told us they had been surprised how positive and liberating talking to us had been, and how much they had appreciated being given an opportunity to speak about their job. The quality of the data collected is thus due more to the fact that they revealed positive aspects of this profession as they experienced it on a daily basis, rather the representativeness of a sample of POs.

Limited to a unique prison setting, in the northeast region of France, in a very specific historical (long-lasting) and political (immediate) context, this study can only claim to uncover the uniqueness of this environment. We hope that this very uniqueness, particularly since it is about to disappear in several months, will nonetheless introduce some of the diversity that has thus far been lacking in the extant literature.

Findings

Rurality, as mentioned, was not an initial theme in our research question; therefore, it was not reflected in our questionnaire. Nonetheless, it was systematically formulated in one way or another by our interviewees. It was particularly salient in their responses to four dimensions of our questionnaire, that is: safety; the work-private life cut-off; the relational aspects of their professional activity; the right distance between officers and inmates; and, lastly, The Abbey, as a (rural) family.

For each of these themes, rurality took a front seat either as a contextualization of POs' personal and professional lives, or as a means of enhancing professional *habitus* or routines, or as a major resource used to overcome the paradoxical injunctions related to their profession, and, in particular how to perform and sustain the delicate compromise between the relational and the security requirements of the job.

Rural safety

The rural environment has repeatedly been presented by POs as providing them with a sense of safety. This particular theme was notably apparent when in interviews with those who were transferred to The Abbey after having had a previous experience in an urban prison, or who had to go through an urban stint in their rural prison career, for one reason or another (for instance, in the course of training for a higher rank position).

The interviews only allowed us to touch upon PO's *perceptions* of their safety, rather than to their *actual* safety or security; as a reminder, this was our goal. With this in mind, two themes strongly emerged from the interviews. On the one hand, our interviewees told us repeatedly that the rural environment was beneficial inasmuch as it was seen to placate the inmates and thus had a positive impact on the prison's overall atmosphere, making it quieter and calmer. Plus, the rural environment itself provides POs with a feeling of protection.

Regarding the first theme, it may appear contradictory to refer to the quiet and calm dimension of The Abbey, when another salient theme in our research pertained to acute trauma and the unleashing of extreme violence against POs – and this will be the subject of another publication. Indeed, reality and perceptions were contrasted: yes, this was a high-security prison, hosting particularly volatile and dangerous inmates who, on occasion, would lash out; yet rurality was perceived as limiting the number of such occurrences and as constituting a rather powerful shield against this happening more frequently, along with something which helped them recover and be resilient, both individually and collectively.

The Abbey is located in an old monastery founded in the Middle Ages. Like many Cistercian¹ abbeys, it is housed in the hollow of a remote valley, at the very heart of nature. A great number of the prisoners' cells oversee this wilderness. Additionally, several of the promenades are naturally vegetated; nature appears to be so powerful and omnipresent that it even penetrates the high security fences.

When they described The Abbey and its surroundings, and related them to issues of security, POs would refer to two different subjects. First, they referred to the prison's isolated location as providing security:

Senior PO 1: 'You see, what is interesting with a rural prison such as The Abbey is that people on the outside have a harder time coming over and threatening us.'

There clearly are tensions between their superiors, who deplore The Abbey's isolation – and this has been presented to us as being one of the reasons why it had to close down, since families, judges, and other agencies could not easily travel there – and POs, who argue in favour of this remote prison, in order to win their case against the shutdown.

The second theme we uncovered regarding rural safety pertains to how nature can appease even the most hardened and violent inmates. Several POs contrasted this with monotonous and concrete urban prisons:

Senior PO 1: 'Nature, which the guys, the inmates, can see through their windows, I mean, I know some of them, they present as big gangsters, and show off, and then they

turn all soft when they see a deer at 6 am... For sure you don't see this in the middle of Paris...'

PO 16: 'Nah, it's not a hotel, you see... well, it's sort of super green outside. There's the forest, they [the inmates] sometimes tell us, that the sound of birds and all that, those who come from Paris [*he imitates an inmate excitedly exclaiming*]: "I saw deer, I saw deer in the forest!!"... not like when they're in concrete buildings in the inner city!'

For some, this has a direct impact on prisoners' behaviour:

Senior PO 3: 'Most inmates absolutely adore The Abbey, because it's quiet, and because they come in contact with nature... it may sound like nothing much, but guys who have been locked up for years and years, being in contact with nature, its values, it is appealing.'

The quasi-therapeutic dimension of nature and rurality is thus analysed as providing a feeling of safety within this high security prison.

A second dimension of rurality and safety, this time outside the walls of the prison, was also repeatedly mentioned. Appreciative inquiry, which invited our interviewees to speak about what made them proud to do their job, often led POs to talk about their uniform. Their attire was presented as being important, on the one hand, because it generates an *esprit de corps* (and identification with other POs). On the other hand, it creates a symbolic distance from the inmates (i.e. differentiation). It also enables a sense of connection with other public forces, such as the police, the gendarmerie, and the military, with whom they want to identify. POs additionally also referred to rurality when they mentioned their uniforms. A common theme in French prison studies, and one that both Combessie (1996) and Milhaud (2009) noted, is that this highly symbolic aspect of a POs' identification and identity cannot comfortably be worn in the streets of urban cities (it would present important security issues). In contrast, one can safely leave a rural prison after one's shift and be seen in the village, in one's car, and so on wearing the prison garb. If POs can proudly wear their uniforms, it is because rural areas are deemed safer places to live in. Thus, while the interviews did confirm that POs, as a profession, lack recognition and visibility relative to other law enforcement agencies, those who work in rural prisons seem to be relatively spared:

PO 5: 'At [The Abbey], you can leave your shift wearing your uniform. You don't fear being assaulted in the outside world. You would not do this in [City T]...in [City C]...in big cities. [here] it's because it's a rural area, most of us are known...in all the villages around...every single person knows at least one prison staff or has a family member who works for the prison services.'

What such comments tell us is that POs perceive cities as being threatening and as making the exaltation of their professional identity impossible; conversely, rural areas are seen as protective and as supporting professional pride. What some of the POs also convey is that wearing their uniform outside the perimeters of the prison setting enables them to take on a desirable, police-like identity. This is notably expressed in the context of prison

'extractions', that is, operations wherein POs must transport prisoners to court for their hearings and other appearances in secure convoys:

PO 7: [*beamingly recalling one day when he transported a famous prisoner, K., whose name he clearly enjoyed dropping*]: 'So I got there at 3 am. There were gendarmes, all in blue, and the prison services SWAT team [ERIS]... and the gendarme SWAT team [GIGN] and all that. I thought to myself "there must be something going on here!" So that's it, I get in and I see the governor and he says to me: "you'll be going with them. I'll tell you where right before you leave »... So, it all went peacefully. The ERIS, the police and the GIGN, went to get K... so it was around 3.30. They handled him in in two shakes of a duck's tale; put him in my transfer van and told him "now you're going to [prison] B."

The notion that rurality soothes inmates and provides safety and security is a common theme amongst POs; it is not one that is shared by governors. This was already pointed out by Combessie (1999) more than two decades ago. The consequence for this is that rather than transfer every three to four years as normally expected, POs stay much longer. For governors – and, we hypothesised for the prison headquarters who decided to close The Abbey – this is a security hazard.

And indeed, The Abbey's officers are in for the long haul, some of them actually have stayed for decades without ever being cut off from its bucolic surroundings. Rurality, however, allows them to more easily go from their shift to their homes.

Rural cut-off

Like the first theme, this second one was similarly absent from our questionnaire and initial line of inquiry. It nonetheless strongly emerged from our interviews. It was mentioned in Crawley's (2004a) ethnographic study in a much more negative way. In her work, the main question was whether POs managed to leave prison life behind when they went home, some wanting to protect their family environment, others unfortunately failing (and becoming paranoid, suspicious, and overcontrolling). There is no doubt that appreciative inquiry did play a part in painting a much more positive picture of the prison-home cut-off. We did provide encouragement and showed our interest when POs explained how they survived trauma, expressed joy and pride, or explained how they put their job at a safe distance while insulating their private lives from their correctional responsibilities. They then entrusted us with detailed and intimate concrete or psychological 'tricks', which allowed them not to 'mull over' too much, as some of them phrased it.

As in Crawley (2004a), however, cutting off was not easy for everyone. Some POs initially seemed to have a natural ability to switch off prison and prison-related thoughts when they left their shift – or at least told us they did. As in Crawley's (2004a) work, they referred to the door closing behind them, as allowing them to mentally shut off attendant cognitions and emotions. They expressed that this was something which was acquired with experience. This is to be understood by reference to the virile culture which prevails in this line of work. Some of the interviewees thus likened the ability to mentally cut off as being a sign of inner strength:

PO 18: 'In the evening I move on to other things... but I would say that it depends on an individual's personality. Some can do this; others not so much.'

Some as in Crawley (2004b) state that successfully performing cut-off is a necessary form of abnegation, in order to protect their families, and not to contaminate (this very word being used in Crawley, 2004 b: 235) their home. By virtue of being stated, this imperative is somewhat magically successful, such as when PO 15 observed: "I don't mix family and prison."

However, even this smaller number of POs initially presenting with a 'cool dude' persona eventually dropped this front, thanks to the intimacy and trust generated by appreciative inquiry.

The vast majority of the other POs told us they made the conscious and deliberate decision to wall off their private lives, referring to this as a 'necessity'.

Others referred to professional performance as providing them with the much-needed compartmentalisation. They explained how they made sure they left a 'clean' landing to those who were taking the next shift, with all the potential issues sorted out and no urgent task left to do.

These officers explained that their conscious decision to cut off came with conditions attached, and this is where rurality was frequently mentioned. Paradoxically, the very fact that The Abbey is – as we shall see – one big family, and importantly, coupled with its location in a rural area, make the very notion of cutting off both irrelevant and impossible, and yet, ... more successful. For example, PO 16 commented: "We leave The Abbey and we then go to little Abbey." What PO 16 is thus saying is that, at a concrete and geographical level, The Abbey is both a prison and a village, and that some of them, as himself, actually live in this village, which has the very same name as the prison. As a matter of fact, locals can actually walk to the prison. What PO 16 furthermore suggests, at a more symbolic level, is that there is no true cut-off between this rurally embedded prison and its countryside environment, and, therefore, it is pointless to separate the two.

Rurality was more specifically presented as being a condition, if not a primary resource, for the distancing of psychological ruminations related to the mental workload and constant hypervigilance of POs such as themselves (who had to work in a high-security prison with prisoners serving long sentences). The Abbey contrasted with other high-security prisons, however, because rurality alleviated the mental strain inherent in such settings. When POs left their shift, they were surrounded with peaceful nature, which allowed them to mentally escape. They additionally explained – and this theme was very frequently mentioned – that they managed to perform this cut-off because they could then enjoy rural activities such as cutting wood, gardening, hunting, fishing, and so on. PO 1 described it by simply stating: "You can harvest grapes; you can go fishing..."

Some of the officers went as far as to have a second countryside job. This, in fact, is rooted in history, where rural residents used to cumulate rural activities (whether permanent

or seasonal) with a permanent position as a factory worker or administrative civil servant. This tradition is still very much alive, as the retired PO told us:

Retired PO: 'Well I, I mean I wanted to continue helping my parents out. I didn't want to leave. That's why I stayed... and I continued harvesting grapes a little. In a way I had two jobs.'

Some POs, such as PO 13, chose not to go up the professional ladder, preferring to remain a simple PO, precisely in order to continue enjoying alternating between two jobs, one at the prison, the other in the countryside:

S13: 'When I started out as a PO, all I wanted was to work here at The Abbey... That's it. I didn't want to move up the ranks or anything; just to remain a PO, because with our shifts, we can do other things on the side... there's the vineyards, wood, and so on.'

As the aforementioned literature, whether in France or elsewhere, has amply documented, being a PO is rarely a vocation, but generally represents a rational economic choice. This is particularly the case in France, where POs are civil servants (and thus are guaranteed to keep their job). At The Abbey, this economic dimension is reinforced by the second jobs that rurality provides; it also further solidifies family links, since rural jobs usually aim at helping families out. Thus, rather than being 'side jobs', for many of our interviewees, these rural activities are seen as being emotionally and cognitively equal to their prison employment. This may help explain why they are so successful at providing a prison-home cut off:

PO 17: '[We'd do] anything in order to empty our heads, in order not to ruminate about prison all the time. It's impossible. Precisely, we need to find something else to do outside of it. I myself worked a little in grape harvesting. It kept me busy. I found a boss. I had to work outside, no matter what the weather was like, but I had to find something else. It did me good.'

Some POs also refer to solitary rural activities which, as a result, provide relational withdrawal, but contact with nature in its stead. PO 12, for example, talked about it this way: 'We try and disconnect from prison life. I am myself also a fisherman, so I disconnect thanks to fishing.'

Additionally, big open spaces and nature help reduce psychological tensions (coupled with physical activities or rural related sports such as hiking, cycling, and running). Some POs see this as therapeutic, such as PO 15, who had experienced two highly traumatic events (a serious assault and a prison riot) and who replaced prescription pills with sports:

PO 15: "Yes, at the beginning I had to take pills. I did not sleep well at night. But after three weeks to a month I stopped. I told myself, "I have to stop all of this." And I started doing sports, running, cycling, and so on. I tried to exhaust myself so that I could sleep. Because our job is not hard physically, but it's hard mentally.'

Lastly, rurality is also perceived as more virtuous because it is lost in nature and isolated and allows POs to be both close to their community and yet fully embedded in it.

Some choose to live very close to the immediate prison vicinity, whilst others, though remaining in the countryside, feel the need to reside farther away in order to successfully cut off.

If rurality allows the PO to distance themselves from prison life, we found that it also helps provide the 'right distance' between them and the inmates.

Right distance thanks to rurality

The issue of the right distance between POs and inmates is nothing new. Chauvenet and colleagues already referred to it in their 1992 study (on this concept also, see Liebling et al., 2011) that is 'being sufficiently close to inmates in order to gain their respect and cooperation, whilst keeping the required distance in terms of authority' (Chauvenet et al., 1992, p. 121) and in order to protect themselves against the danger of corruption. This extremely complex fine line allows staff to understand what is admissible and what is not. Traditionally, POs delineate the right distance through symbols and external manifestations, or merely by reference to legal rules; for instance, in France, via the strict prohibition of the use of the familiar 'tu' instead of the more formal 'vous' when addressing prisoners. However, in high security prisons, it is more difficult to maintain such a formal distance (Herzog-Evans, 2015a): using 'vous' with people one interacts with for a number of years is perceived as being stuffy and artificial.

Additionally, this long-term cohabitation – reinforced at The Abbey, because POs remain in this prison for a greater number of years than usual – requires them to develop rather close relationships with inmates, particularly with potentially volatile ones, whilst, paradoxically, still maintaining a safe distance. This implies a continuous, and potentially perilous, pendulum movement of rapprochement and distancing. We did have a question pertaining to the 'right distance': we asked POs what they thought it meant.

The very complexity of this balancing act was illustrated by the singular richness of the detailed responses we obtained, and the great variety of definitions provided for the concept of 'right distance', with some POs erring more towards the relational aspects of their craft, whilst others were more focused on authority and security.

One important dimension pertained to the vital necessity not to reveal any identifying information about themselves or their families. POs did struggle with the issue of self-disclosure. These hesitations boiled down to the following question: how could they protect themselves and keep an appropriate distance with inmates, whilst at the same time keeping their conversations human and authentic?

Whilst Combessie (1996) found, 25 years ago, that in this particular prison the power rested in the POs' hands – contrasting with many other high security prisons of the time (Herzog-Evans, 1998) – with authoritarian and disciplinarian professional practices that had been perpetuated thanks to the generational and rural transmission of professional experience –our own research found that rurality could also function in a different way.

Twenty-five years later, and with the contribution of appreciative inquiry, it no longer appears to be just about the *determinism* of rurality as a prison management tool, but also

about realising how the *use* of rurality can also lead to negotiated and regulated types of relations with prisoners.

As a relational tool, rurality was used by POs in their daily interactions with prisoners, and it worked in support of the right distance. Referring in their daily conversations to rural life allowed them to reveal a little about themselves whilst, in actual fact, not revealing anything too intimate:

PO 15: 'I don't talk a lot about myself. I mean I talk a little about me, but not about my family. The fact that I do sports... they know I like football, and fishing, but nothing else.'

This second quote shows that, conversely, other than classic football (soccer), other subjects can be talked about, and in particular, those which are related to rurality. When a PO talks about fishing, hunting, or cutting wood, s/he both reveals something about him/herself, which nurtures the long-term relationships required in a prison such as The Abbey, whilst at the same time not revealing anything too identifying:

PO 4: 'They'll try and coax you and make you talk about, for instance, your children and all that. You mustn't talk about that, hum, because then they would be all too happy to say, "this PO has two, three children, all girls," you name it. [but] he's a hunter, he goes fishing, he does his wood, like all the other The Abbey POs, then they're all happy. They have nothing else to think about.'

The second part of this PO's sentence ('like all the other The Abbey POs') shows how rural activities are non-identifying precisely because all POs take part in them, as if they were part of the professional corps.

To sum up on this issue, rurality touches upon and helps with a variety of essential professional values and needs: safety and security; the development of relational skills in the context of hypervigilance; and mitigation of post-shift prison-home cut-off.

Rurality is thus conceptualised in different ways by POs; it flows through the inside and the outside of the prison and officiates like a link between prison and its surrounding environment. At first glance, the way that POs utilise rurality at The Abbey may appear instrumental. However, appreciative inquiry provided us with a rich and positive material which revealed how deeply rurality was rooted in these practitioners and served as the cement of their esprit de corps and camaraderie. This, in turn, led us to identify a new theme which we called 'The Abbey Family'.

The Abbey (Rural) Family

What is truly remarkable here is how much the feeling of belonging to the same family – which, as we shall now see, is grounded both in a classic rural 'everyone knows everyone' dimension and in the intergenerational transmission of their job – also contributes to feelings of peace, safety, and professional well-being.

No less than 50% of our sample had a family member who was working, or had previously worked, for the prison services. When one adds the POs whose parents had friends

or contacts employed by the prison services, it went up to 59%. Becoming a prison officer or working for the prison services by way of family tradition is not unique to The Abbey. What is more unique to this facility, however, is that it has known several generations of POs belonging to the same family: from the grandfather to the grandson/daughter, or a great-uncle to a nephew. In his book, Combessie (1996) called these circumstances a 'prison officers' dynasty' (p. 207).

Our interviews show that POs fully claim this family dimension, which in fact refers to two things: on the one hand, a lot of them are truly related (many are cousins, brothers, sons, nephew of each other or married to one another) or, on the other hand, at a symbolic level (i.e. POs who feel they belong to 'The Abbey Family'):

PO 10: 'It's like a family here. We all know each other. We're all locals. Elders like me, or rookies who just got here, we're all locals. We live nearby. And those who come from other areas have a hard time adjusting. Mind you, some of them – with time – do manage.'

PO 3: 'My father was a chief foreman here; my mother was born in this village in a house nearby, and it's the same for me. So, I simply followed in their footsteps.'

Family is how solidarity and camaraderie, which are inherent to this profession, and indispensable in a high security prison where POs must jump to the rescue of each other, express themselves. This is not anecdotal. This particular prison has been at the heart of several historical traumas, with lethal escapes, hostage taking, riots, and so on. The trauma undoubtedly produced by these events – which we also frequently have witnessed – were historically attached both to the prison itself and to the families to which our interviewees belonged. Family ties both contributed to perpetuating the memory of these events – to the point that some POs emotionally recounted incidents that took place before they were even born – but also provided the emotional support of a strong group's resilience.

Senior PO 2: 'The Abbey is a high security prison. So, yeah, we had serious things happening, but we've also got rurality and solidarity among locals.'

As we can see with this quote, whether reflecting actuality or an idealised version thereof, this prison's practitioners feel they belong to the same family and, as well, regard this feeling of belonging as rooted in rurality. Rurality creates, cements, and sustains their relatedness, fellowship, and solidarity. It is rurality which gives them the opportunity to share festive and joyful moments amongst themselves and together with their families. It is the presence of The Abbey as an integral part of the rural landscape that has enabled this austere prison to appear to them as non-threatening since they were children, thus also allows them to later envisage it as a potential and beneficent employer. As children, most of the locals were allowed to visit their PO relatives at the facility:

PO 10: 'I had already seen the inside... I was not heading towards the unknown... In the past, POs' families were allowed in for visits. On Saturdays or Sundays, there was a lunch at the mess and we could attend.'

PO: 6: ‘I have memories of the mess, of fishing contests with more than 200 guests, with a giant barbecue in the big chimney.’

This prison occupies a very specific place in the local rural landscape. It is as if it has always been there and, as a matter of fact, The Abbey has been there for centuries. Whereas US or French sociological or economical literature on rural prisons points to either NIMBY, for fear of disturbances, or crime, or PIMBY, with the hope of reaping the benefits of economic growth and reduced economic isolation; in this case, we identified a strong ‘please stay in my field’ (PSIMF) mantra. This is no doubt explained, in part, by the strength with which The Abbey contributes to the local economy’s sustainability. Above all, however, it fosters a sense of kinship and relatedness rooted in both the figurative and the real sense of the term, in rurality. Thus, for the handful of people transferred to this region, who are not locals, a variety of integrative rituals are performed which are connected to both family and rurality. Whereas in other institutions integration is gained mostly by being recognised as being a good professional (and in the case of POs, by ostensibly following know-how standards and values), in this case, it is also about *rural* standards and values:

PO 1: ‘It’s a very, very important thing at The Abbey. Everything is about family. You have the [name X] and the [name Y] and all of that, all these, these villages, and hum, locals, they’re all cousins. At the time they were all cousins. You had the father [name Z], and the family [name Z], and you had the grandfather, the father [name] who was the chief of... the wing... When I got there, I took somebody’s place; a local’s. [*remembering a conversation he had upon his arrival:*] “So, hum, do you hunt?” “No.” “Gee!” [*laughter*] “Do you fish?” “Yeah!” “Thank God!” [*laughter*]... and “Do you do grape harvesting?” And little me: “I don’t know what that is.” “We’ll teach you.” And that’s it. That’s how you become a part of it. You are accepted because you start... harvesting, fishing, and then you get, “So you do fish? You don’t hunt? No worries, can you replace me on Sundays for hunting and I’ll help you out with fishing?”

Both family bonds and professional ties are formed through rurality, and working in combination with each other. PO 1 was ritually integrated when the group found out that he fished; he was further integrated by being pushed to participate in other countryside activities (a little like family integration for in-laws or stepchildren).

Rurality is an essential component of professional integration. It is also how group members join forces when danger looms and help POs deal with the stress and hardships associated with working in a high-security prison. POs regard shared countryside activities as the tie that binds them together and which can be reinjected into their professional practices:

PO 5: ‘In a rural environment, things are different... each one of us knows a prison practitioner or someone in their family who works for the prison services... Is it because they had to go through tragic events, I don’t know? What’s for sure is that they’ve become really tight-knit. Most of them know each other well. They see each other... in the prison, and also on the outside... they cut wood together, go fishing together, or to the vineyards, and do, if you want, all this work nearby, and have leisure activities together.’

There are only a handful of dissident voices, particularly among those who hold more senior positions, who see family ties as being, at times, an obstacle to hierarchical respect:

Senior PO 3: ‘So, we’re friends at work and we know each other on the outside. Everyone knows each other... [but] one needs to understand that, on the inside, when an order is given, it has to be respected.’

In the situation described, family ties may generate perhaps too much familiarity; this has the potential to negatively impact order and security because, for one, it can lead the staff to stay far too long in this prison setting:

Former governor: ‘So I was confronted to this indigenous population., with its habits, its relatedness, its family stories, its old things, like a Corsican village... I think it is difficult to remain a good PO at The Abbey, precisely because careers are too long there – and how to, how can I say this, how to keep one’s professional skills, which enable one to be a good PO, whilst respecting people’s dignity, these skills which protect security, it’s extremely difficult.’

Yet the same former governor who, in the ten years since leaving the facility has practised law, still refers to ‘being from The Abbey’, although she is not originally even from that locale. She is still considered as being part of the family and, as a matter of fact, regularly returns to The Abbey in the course of her legal practice. When she leaves the premises in this new professional capacity, she notes that “I mean it gets to the point where they [still] say to me, “goodbye, colleague””.

Conclusion

Rurality is usually conceptualised in economic, racial, or social terms. The literature has thus studied what happens when a new prison is built in a rural area, why this happens, and how the locals react to it. This research has explored the limitation of the rural-urban dichotomy relative to crime rates and types of crime. Only a handful, essentially French studies (Combessie, 1996; Milhaud, 2009), have explored the intricate dynamics of rural embeddedness and their external manifestations. Combessie (1996), for instance, studied the immediate whereabouts of the prison and the family ties that bind together generations of POs.

Other than our focus on a continental Europe jurisdiction, our study contrasted with the bulk of the literature in a number of ways. First, we focused on a prison that was built within a Middle Ages abbey – which, in essence, has ‘always’ been present and which, as a prison, is about to close down (i.e. the exact opposite of the typical situation, in which a new rural prison is being erected).

Our investigation differs from both the international and French literature further in our use of appreciative inquiry as a methodological approach. Additionally, we focused on the positive dimensions of rurality. It is not to say that negative dimensions are not present; it is simply that we chose to focus on this particular side of the coin. This led us to uncover a number of things which a more balanced viewpoint, or one focusing on the negatives, would

perhaps not have found. Our results should therefore be weighed against the results of studies leading to more negative results, for rural prisons are neither a horror movie nor a 'big house in the prairie' (Eason, 2017).

Importantly for people who must do 'dirty work' (Lemmergaard & Murh, 2012) and who experience repeated trauma (Ricciardelli et al., 2018), a positive identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) can be found in family ties and professional bonds, the two being combined at The Abbey, with rurality playing an important role.

Four themes emerged from our investigation. The first pertains to the rural environment as providing POs with a feeling of greater safety. First, the countryside – which inmates can see from their cell windows – is believed to appease them, thereby reducing tensions; second, the rural environment itself seems to function to calm the POs (and is thus perceived by them as being less dangerous and threatening).

A second theme is the fact that the rural landscape provides POs with a prison-home cut-off. Natural landscapes are patently distinct from concrete-filled settings, and their constrained professional environment. Rural activities (such as fishing, farming, hunting, etc.) represent another form of prison-home cut-off. In this regard, rurality is also seen as a condition, if not a primary resource, for the distancing and respite from psychological ruminations related to POs' professional workload.

A third theme pertains to how rurality is instrumentalised by POs in their interactions with prisoners: discussions about the countryside and rural activities allows them to create both dialogue and intimacy, whilst keeping inmates at a reasonable distance and revealing nothing too personal about themselves or their families.

Lastly, we found that kinship is a particularly salient theme, whether The Abbey's practitioners are bound by actual family ties – and a lot of them indeed are – or connected rather by professional bonds. The feeling of belonging to the same family is deeply rooted in the performing of rural activities.

Rurality provides POs with safety, relatedness, identity, values, and a feeling of competence.

Our study has important limitations. Firstly, it is qualitative in nature and focuses on perceptions, rather than on objective reality. Secondly, it only focuses on the positives, since it has relied on appreciative inquiry. Thirdly, it pertains to a unique prison, a high security one at that, with a centuries-old history. That being said, our goal was precisely to focus on POs' viewpoint and perceptions. Moreover, we may have seen only one, positive, side of the coin, yet this is a side which is seldom uncovered in prison studies (Liebling et al., 1999). Additionally, historical prisons (i.e. built in convents or abbeys) are not rare in France (Heullant-Donat et al., 2010); the findings may thus relate to other facilities as well.

The very singularity of what we have found is – hopefully – what makes it interesting, if not generalisable. Indeed, the attributions made by our sample of rural POs though perhaps not directly translatable to many prisons given The Abbey's singularity, may nonetheless serve as a useful framework for studying the experience of POs. As an example, if

'camaraderie' and leisure activities help sustain POs, it might be interesting to study how they manifest themselves in urban environments; perhaps encouraging such camaraderie and activities might help them deal with the difficult aspects of their profession.

Endnote

¹The Cistercians are a Catholic religious order of monks and nuns that began in the late 11th century as a branch of another religious order known as the Benedictines. Cistercian is a variation on the Latin for sacred. The order itself began as an attempt to return to a simpler, quieter lifestyle of manual labour and contemplative study. Today, there are over 2,500 Cistercian priests and nuns, serving in countries from Vietnam to France. The Abbey, built more than 900 years ago, was turned into a prison during the Empire (Napoleon). In the early 19th century, it housed no less than 3,000 prisoners.

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