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Atmospheres of Trust: Understanding Social Work in Swiss Prisons

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Summary: Prisons are usually described as spaces of institutional mistrust. In an ethnographic study on social work in Swiss prisons, we experienced several moments when we felt that there was “trust in the air”. Inspired by phenomenological and post-humanist thinking, we take these moments as entry points to explore trust in prison. We aim to understand how atmospheres of trust emerge and how they affect the relational work between social workers and incarcerated people. For social work, it seems pivotal to acknowledge the affective power of material and immaterial elements to co-create together with (non-)human elements atmospheres of trust as a basis for relational work.
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1 Introduction¹

Prisons are usually described as places of institutionalized mistrust. The rationale behind this representation is based on the notion that people are incarcerated because they have broken basic social rules. Criminal offence, therefore, is understood as an act of breaking the tacit trust of societies wherein members comply with the agreed-upon rules. Breaking this tacit trust results not only in the perceived need to sanction but also in the notion that incarcerated people cannot be trusted, and their criminal record represents their loss of trustworthiness. The result is increased control over incarcerated people as we experience it currently in criminal justice (Garland, 2001; McNeill, 2019).

At the same time, the criminal justice system is strongly built on the principle of rehabilitation. In Switzerland, this principle is detailed in the Penal Code (Art. 75 para. 1 PC), which states that the system should support incarcerated people in their social behaviour and enhance their ability to desist from reoffending. One of the important pillars of rehabilitation in the Swiss system is the principle of progression. Incarcerated people, specifically those with longer sentences, progress during their trajectory through the criminal justice system from

closed to increasingly more open settings. This progression is marked by increasing degrees of trust in the incarcerated person's ability to comply with rules.

Although trust can be read as a progression during an incarcerated person's trajectory, there are moments and elements of trust independent from this process that emerge situationally in everyday prison life. As part of a research project on social work in Swiss prisons, we became interested in such moments of trust between and around bodies and spaces inside and outside of prison. For us as researchers who experienced the day-to-day work of social work professionals, these moments pointed to the importance of creating transparent and, at least to some extent, trustworthy relationships with incarcerated people. At the same time, questions arose, such as what constitutes trust in prisons and to what extent trust can unfold within a coercive context. Further, we ask how trust emerges in social work practice and how the trusted people respond to it. We started to look for such moments of trust, for our materials pointed to a specific movement of opening rigid and controlled structures towards an unfolding and flourishing of possibilities and learnings that were linked to situations that show trust. Our aim is to analyse how trust and such movements towards openings coincide.

We approach these questions by focusing on moments when *we* as researchers *felt* there was trust "in the air" because we were affected by "non-verbal, non-conscious and, often, non-human embodied experiences" (Turner et al., 2022, p.2). In this sense, our affectations pointed us towards how atmospheres emerge and affect human and non-human elements (Anderson, 2009). This mutual affectation of the researcher(s) and the field represents an integral element of post-humanist research assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2015, 2023). The post-humanist perspective helped us to become more aware of our affectation and relate this affectation to the atmosphere that emerged. This led us to think about what happened to us and in relation to other (non-)humans in these moments. In the following, we will analyse two situations through the lens of atmospheres by referring to a phenomenological understanding of the term (Anderson, 2009). By doing so, we rely on post-humanist thinking to grasp "affective atmospheres" of trust and to understand how, for example, a "mood, feeling, ambience, tone, and other ways of naming collective affects" (Anderson, 2009, p. 78) relate to and affect bodies in carceral spaces.

We will first explore the notion of trust in the prison research literature. Although trust is often presented as dysfunctional in the coercive context due to institutionally inscribed mistrust, several studies reveal moments of trust and show how incarcerated people and staff respond to trust through professional relation work in prisons. Therefore, and contrary to the functionalistic

understanding of trust based on rational logics of knowing, or how something *is*, we focus on emerging moments of trust by developing the notion of atmospheres of trust from a phenomenological and post-humanist perspective. This is followed by a brief contextualization of the study. The main part uses the materials from research in two so-called “open” prisons. We trace atmospheres of trust in two very different situations, one that represents an inside space of the prison (i. e., the social workers’ office) and the other an outside leisure activity. Our aim to explore trust in the everyday work of social work professionals develops as follows. First, trust as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in social work practice helps open up new possibilities of thinking and performing through entangled material and human relationships. Second, we argue that trust in professional relational work can be seen as a counterbalance to the ritualized prison mechanisms of discipline and control (Foucault, 1991). Third, we argue that trust can even go hand in hand with the unfolding of lines of flight in the Deleuzian sense for working in prison in terms of rehabilitation.

2 Literature Review: (Mis)Trust in Prison

Characterizing prisons as places where trust is “loaded and strained” (Johnsen et al., 2011) or “fragile” Liebling (with Arnold, 2004) and always associated with risks (Ugelvik, 2022) underscores the widespread notion that prisons are places of mistrust. Although the literature on trust in social work focuses primarily on child protection services (e. g., Shemmings et al., 2012; Warming, 2013), the few existing studies on prisons have revealed the importance of studying trust as a concept for working with people, which also affects the quality of prison life Liebling (with Arnold, 2004).

In a UK-based study, Liebling concludes that prison officers’ attitudes and practices are pivotal in shaping a climate based on trust and trustworthiness in the prison regime. This becomes particularly evident when we look at how staff and prisoners “interact during rule-enforcing and non-rule-enforcing transactions” Liebling (with Arnold, 2004, p. 236). Despite the sparks of trust found in their research, they state that mutual mistrust among prisoners and between prisoners and staff is quite common in English prisons. This results in a “low-trust environment” (Crewe, 2009, p. 301) or one that “is more or less exclusively looking for faults, lacks, and dangers” (Ugelvik, 2022, p. 627).

For the most part, two points seem to influence the development of trust in the relations between staff and incarcerated people: the size of the prison and the self-concepts and resources of prison staff. Regarding prison size, research in small-scale prisons in England and Norway has illustrated that a small size fosters social engagement among prisoners, staff, and prison management because

they simply meet more often during the day, thus allowing for informal conversations instead of formal and hierarchical communication systems (Johnsen et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2019). In their study in a small-scale English prison, Liebling and her colleagues point out that mutual trust develops when staff, management, and prisoners get to know each other through day-to-day contact and transform this community ethos through the management's decision to build on "intelligent trust" (Liebling et al., 2019, p. 107). Although this emphasizes that trust is used intelligently in staff-prisoner relationships as a strategic means of control based on knowing someone, Liebling (with Arnold, 2004, p. 248) defines trust as "reliance on the honesty, reliability and good sense of a person, the level of responsibility or confidence invested in and experienced by individuals". Their definition supports our understanding of trust as being developed through interpersonal relationships as an element of care (Bozalek, 2019).

There are various models of prison staff's self-concepts. When staff-prisoner relationships go along with a lack of trust because contacts are overall very minimal, as in US mega prisons, officers see themselves as "enforcers of compliance" who "deliver services with little interaction and humanity" (Crewe, 2009, p. 2). In larger German prisons with a general staff shortage, the lack of trust may also result from limited social contacts between staff and incarcerated people (Neubauer et al., 2023).

In a very different model, such as small-scale Norwegian facilities, most incarcerated people have a so-called "contact officer".² In this situation, officers can engage on the relational level and build trust by enabling incarcerated persons' experiences of freedom to strengthen their belonging to a moral and political community (Ugelvik, 2022). This results in an individual focus on their future, and change is part of the prison ethos, which is based on strong relationships and provides opportunities for prisoners to interact with the local community (e.g., selling homemade products at the local market, walking around the city) (Antonsen & Wahl Sandvold, 2022; Ugelvik, 2022). Prison officers have, in this vein, been increasingly trained in relational work in addition to their security tasks (Johnsen et al., 2011). Whether the prison regime is willing to allow incarcerated people to take initiative and strengthen their personal development (Liebling et al., 2019) or to carry out tasks that allow them to circulate autonomously (Marti, 2023, p. 217), the prison remains a custodial institution, and the majority of incarcerated people perceive it as such (Neubauer et al., 2023).

Ethnographic prison studies also draw attention to the fact that architecture can affect people in prison (Fransson et al., 2018). However, a trusting prison climate is not so much a material issue (Antonsen & Wahl Sandvold,

2022); rather, it emerges from encounters based on emotional relationships with professionals (Liebling et al., 2019). Such relationships also require access to spaces that allow incarcerated people to show emotions, for example, in the frame of working alliances with social workers (Richter & Emprechtinger, 2021).

3 A Post-Humanist Approach to Atmospheres of Trust

We first look at the specificity of relational work in the context of coercion and the conceptualization of trust in social work before outlining a phenomenological and post-humanist understanding of atmospheres of trust. Relational work in coercive contexts is framed by social work professionals' mandate to control incarcerated people's well-being while also caring for them (Bukowski & Nickolai, 2018). The element of control implies that social workers, alongside other prison staff, are responsible for monitoring prisoners' progression in custody to prevent recidivism. In the carceral logic, they have control over prisoners, which is formally set out in an enforcement plan (*Vollzugsplan* in German). This plan includes working on the risk factors related to the offence³ and a roadmap with targets for release from prison. In practical work with service users, this control function leads to social workers carrying out their caring role framed through this enforcement plan (Emprechtinger & Richter, 2023, p. 3).

In the traditional literature on social work, trust is a crucial element of the relational work between social work professionals and service users (e.g., Soukiala & Pietilä, 2024). Therefore, trust is mostly understood as an interpersonal issue that must be established through professional practice, such as communication (e.g., Oelkers & Sundermann, 2022; Rüeegger et al., 2021), and should not be relied on blindly and in every respect (Luhmann, 2014, p. 1). The literature strongly relies on individuals and their power to act, in contrast to a post-humanist perspective.

One aspect of the individual-centred (i.e., strongly humanist) literature in social work theory that also seems important for a post-humanist approach is the notion that *trust* and *control* cannot be conceived of as separate concepts. Whereas trust and mistrust are opposites, trust and control are rather complementary and interdependent in carceral institutions and can be seen as a duality, as Möllering (2005) points out. Trust and mistrust represent positive and negative expectations, which are based on the benevolent and malevolent agency of the other; however, control can also be framed as a positive expectation based on a control strategy focussing on the embedded other person (see the notion of "intelligent trust", Liebling et al., 2019).

This ability to respond, or, as it is formulated in post-humanist care ethics, respons-ability (Bozalek, 2019), links trust with care ethics and post-

humanist thinking. Trust assumes an attunement with the other and a willingness to be vulnerable, with the expectation that the other will perform actions on a continuing basis which are important for flourishing to happen. Trust does involve an element of risk, as one assumes that one will not be harmed by the actions of the other, but that the actions will be conducive to flourishing (Bozalek, 2019, p. 220).

There are several points to retain from this notion. First, there is the understanding of *caring as “reiterative patterns of care”* (Bozalek, 2019, p. 220), which, in terms of caring for someone (respons-ability) and care-receiving (responsiveness), points to the expectation that trust and trustworthiness require a continuous effort to emerge. An attunement with the other implies a relatedness of both parties in a caring relationship. Being attuned refers to a movement of sensing the other in all possible ways. A metaphor used in this respect is the octopus, an animal with a high degree of sensitivity (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023). There is a profound relationality in such an understanding of trust (Vela Alarcón & Springgay, 2021) and an entanglement of people and other living and non-living entities in the world (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2021, p. 146f.).

Second, there is also a sense of *vulnerability* in trust on both sides, the ones who trust and the ones who are being trusted. Both sides have something at stake, the loss of trust. This links particularly well to the coercive context of prison, where risks are met with a movement towards control (Foucault, 1991). It also links back to the notion that trust and control cannot be conceived of separately (Möllering, 2005).

Finally, there is the notion of *flourishing*, which points to something that might emerge from trust. From this perspective, trust represents a basis or a condition for new things to emerge, for assemblages to move in new directions towards lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) also to be thought of in a coercive context.

Trust requires work and is always based on reciprocity; however, it is also lived, felt, and responded to in a given situation. Similar to a climate of fear, trust can be sensed affectively. We ground our understanding of “affective atmospheres” (Anderson, 2009) in a phenomenological and post-human understanding of affect, bodies, materialities, and emotions (Bille & Simonsen, 2021; Brown et al., 2019; Repo et al., 2022; Simonsen, 2007, 2013; Turner et al., 2022; Turner & Peters, 2015). At the core lies the notion of a “phenomenal, lived body” (Simonsen, 2013, p. 16). To explore atmospheric spaces, the body needs to be connected to the world in an expressive way. As a perceiving subject, the body is, according to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological terminology, “radically intercorporeal” (Simonsen, 2013, p. 16), thereby engaging in corporeal practices of

others (Simonsen, 2013, p. 17). However, this connection is always bidirectional or reversible. This means that the body is affected (Simonsen, 2013, p. 17) (i. e., feels and perceives the world) and in turn affects and creates the world (Bille & Simonsen, 2021). Simonsen further describes the phenomenological body as simultaneously active (it affects the world) and passive (being affected by the world) (Simonsen, 2013, p. 17). Atmospheres, then, represent the mutual affection between bodies and the world. However, at the same time, they remain somewhat vague: “They are quasi-autonomous. Atmospheres are a kind of indeterminate affective ‘excess’ through which intensive space-times can be created” (Anderson, 2009, p. 80).

Atmospheres can therefore be seen as the tangible but elusive feeling in the air that materializes the emotional and affective connection people have with spaces. Atmospheres are a way to apprehend (as people in a room or as researchers entering a prison) the relationships among the people, the place, their stories, relations, and negotiations (Turner et al., 2022). This means that atmospheres are not pre-existing and do not exist without the stories and relationships among people, places, and materialities. There is always a co-construction of the people and the materialities that mutually affect people. In this sense, they are an expression or an articulation of the complex and intertwined relationships among people, places, and materialities, and they emanate from these complex rhizomatic relationalities, we might understand them as assemblages (Buchanan, 2017; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Therefore, atmospheres are never fixed but always becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) in a mutual process of affectation.

We cannot escape the experiential character of an atmosphere; it is around us, it is molecular, and it enters us through the air we breathe (McCormack, 2008). We literally take the atmosphere in, consume it, feel it with our bodies, and are physically affected. Feeling the air is a very visceral way of feeling the “vibes” of a place (and the people). Because the atmosphere tends to get “inside” us, it also disrupts the distinction among the body, the mind, and the outer world, as defended by Cartesian thinking. The long neglect of the atmosphere in philosophical and psychological literature relates to its almost subversive character in disrupting the Cartesian tradition (Brown et al., 2019).

4 Methodological Considerations and Research Context

We encountered atmospheres of trust while conducting a research project on social work in Swiss prisons.⁴ In our encounters, we felt there were moments when we could sense a climate of trust and when we as researchers also felt more relaxed. However, there were other moments when mistrust or fear was

in the air, palpable while difficult to grasp rationally. A perspective grounded in Deleuze's philosophy of life and critical post-humanist thinking has proven helpful in reaching beyond the well-trodden path of understanding social work as limited to the mere actions of social work professionals. This theoretical perspective also has methodological implications. Following the inspiring writings on post-qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre, 2014, 2021; Taylor, 2017) and research assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2015, 2023), we developed a methodological approach that uses qualitative methods while taking post-humanist thinking into account. This means that we conducted observations (mostly shadowings) and interviews (including walking interviews), collected documents, and used visual methods such as mapping to grasp people's spatial and material experiences. In this setting, walking interviews were particularly innovative, as they challenged the spatial and relational constraints of the prison environment by fostering more open, less hierarchical forms of interaction, especially with incarcerated people. Framed in a post-humanist approach, these methods were fruitful for us as researchers who are not detached from the field but "*in atmospheres*" and part of the environment that emerges (Sumartojo & Pink, 2019, p.37). Our position is therefore creative in multiple ways, representing "a maker and perceiver, (mis)interpreter and co-creator of atmospheric worlds" (Schroer & Schmitt, 2018, p. 6). Our being "*in atmospheres*" in the field led to the conscious choice to take our feeling of trust as the starting point of the analysis. This means that it is our affectation as researchers that drives the analysis and not a coding or another supposedly objective pointer in the data. Nevertheless, our affectation is not arbitrary, as we experienced many moments in the prisons that we studied and aimed to understand in terms of why and how these moments affected us in particular ways.

For this purpose, we spent time in ten prisons across the country, covering the various language areas and types of prisons. We thus observed various ways social work is organized in prisons and which roles and tasks social workers accomplish. From a post-humanist perspective, the methodological approach included taking field notes not solely focussed on the content but rather on the notion of how moments develop and how the various elements co-create affective atmospheres. We then selected various events that affected us and reread their meaning in our team by splitting these events and combining them repeatedly (see "diffractive readings", Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). In a following step, we analysed these situations by using situational maps (Clarke, 2005), which include all the material, human, and non-human elements that affected and were affected in these moments.

For this article, we selected materials from two “open” prisons. The first (Greenfield Prison) is a rather small prison (around 25 places), and the second (Mountainview Prison) is a middle-scale prison (around 100 places) and is embedded in an agricultural site with various workshops in which the incarcerated people work during the day. In the Swiss criminal justice system, which is characterized by a dual system of sentences and measures for confinement,⁵ custodial sentences are set in relation to the gravity of the crime and always have a defined end date. Measures are related to mental health issues, such as substance abuse or mental disorders, that are seen as linked to the crime and include treatment. Their duration depends on the achievement of a goal set by the authority, such as substantial advances in the treatment, and they do not have a definite end date. Switzerland, furthermore, has implemented a system based on the principle of progression, which means that the full trajectory through criminal justice institutions starts (particularly for long sentences) with a closed setting and move to an open one, settings where incarcerated people work or live outside the prison, and conditional release on parole and with the support of probation officers (Baechtold et al., 2016). The degree of openness that comes with progression implies an increasing level of institutional trust in the incarcerated person.

In general, prisons in Switzerland have social services inside the facilities or provided by a cantonal service. To look at social work less structurally, and following the claims of post-humanist thinking, we were also able to ask about the spaces where social work is carried out and their degree of inside- and outsideness. Notions of inside and outside structure the spaces and lives of people in prison. To understand the functioning of a prison, it is important to acknowledge these boundaries and how they relate to society (Turner, 2016). The boundary between inside and outside is not a clear line, and there are multiple spaces of insideness and outsideness. We will therefore use material on atmospheres of trust from one setting we count as an inside space and one we consider to be situated in an outside space. As the analysis shows, trust emerges in these places out of very different affectations of humans and non-humans and through the potentialities that the place offers for flourishing.

5 Inside

The Greenfield prison lies in the middle of a natural recreation area and agricultural landscape near a larger Swiss town. It houses people towards the end of long and short sentences who work outside and return in the evening. Nearly a third of the incarcerated people are subject to measures to address severe

mental disorders and addiction problems (Art. 59 and 60 Penal Code) and spend their free and work time inside the prison facilities, mostly working in the garden and kitchen service. The open infrastructure without walls and bars, which allows for living in shared housing and (at least for some) working and spending leisure time outside the prison, results in a strong orientation towards the outside.

The social service consists of two social workers who provide individual counselling and support for incarcerated people within the prison and for people working or living outside the prison but remaining under custody (the last form of progression before parole). The social service is also the first point of contact for incarcerated people when they encounter problems while outside the prison, usually at work or during leisure time. For this purpose, they use a personal mobile phone, which constitutes a means of “intelligent trust”. From the relational work with their clients, social workers have knowledge about them that allows them to anticipate (with a certain residual risk) the clients’ behaviour. Therefore, the mobile phone can be seen as a means of handing control over to the incarcerated person in the sense of self-disciplining. The mobile phone reverses the “corrective effect” (Foucault, 1991, p. 180) of training the incarcerated person, in the Foucauldian sense, in this case into mutual trust.

During the field research, I (Martin) observed that social work in this prison is also particularly characterized by social interactions outside the office, such as during a chat with incarcerated people. Although the “apparatus of observation” remains obvious in prison (Foucault, 1991, pp. 173, 177), for example, through the gaze of outside cameras, these encounters beyond the conventional work setting outside the office have a relaxing effect on the atmosphere in this prison. As our analysis will show, the duality of control and trust in the context of relational work always extends to an act of negotiating bodies in space and time in the now or, to cite Deleuze, when “the moment has come” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 151).

5.1 *The Reception Area: Trust and the Power of Coffee*

C., a social worker, is responsible for incarcerated people with mental disorders and addiction problems. Given their small number and the fact that they spend the day inside, she meets with them almost every day. Most of the time, she starts the counselling session with a coffee. The coffee ritual reflects a subtle yet powerful form of relational work grounded in the everyday ethics of care. Drawing on Joan Tronto’s (1998) understanding of care as a practice involving attentiveness and responsiveness, the act of offering coffee becomes more than routine hospitality – it initiates an embodied moment of welcoming that reconfigures

the conventional professional–client dynamic. Once, C. told me that she takes paragraph 3 of Article 75 of the Penal Code seriously, which states that “the penal system must correspond as far as possible to the general living conditions [...]”. Or, to use a Foucauldian formulation, the coffee event dissolves the disciplinary part of the meeting (e.g., the incarcerated person is being called for the meeting). In this small gesture of drinking coffee together, trust is not constructed through discourse alone but through the affective and material dimensions of care in practice. C. explained to me,

Starting a meeting with coffee helps service users to calm down when they return from an emotionally stressful session with the therapist or medical staff. (field note, 15.8.2023)

In this respect, she uses her discretionary power to change the standards of counselling by drinking coffee at the beginning while remaining within the legal framework (Dubois, 2014). During my observation in her office, C. emphasized,

In general, if opportunities arise, I will give a bit of space. These opportunities, for example the coffee, are an investment in the working relationship with the service user in building trust because building relationships is the most important thing in prison, as I want to control them as little as possible. (field note, 15.8.2023)

When we stepped out of her office, M., the incarcerated person, was already waiting for us in the reception area. There is a little space between the offices of the social service and the health service where the social worker usually receives incarcerated people. She asked him if he wanted a coffee. “Coffee is always good”, he said. I offered to make coffee for the three of us. While preparing one cup after the other, I made sure not to spill any coffee. Focusing on my task, I took only scarce notice of what they were talking about, but it seemed that their chat drifted off into a relaxed atmosphere, for I could hear them laughing and joking as colleagues would. Emerson (2017, p.2087) states that “laughter can disrupt the feel of spaces, deterritorialising and reterritorialising them towards different modes of relation between bodies, thus generating space times that have a different atmospheric feel”. Sipping the coffee and being affected by its smell seemed to create an atmosphere that made us forget the appointment’s coercive framing. The smell and taste of the coffee and its social effect turned out to be vital for the start of the counselling, for it took the tension out of the involuntariness that usually dominates counselling in coercive contexts (Kähler, 2005).

We all began to feel more comfortable. Additionally, M.'s slight trembling, which I had previously observed, disappeared, and the information I had received from C. – that M. was sentenced for attempted murder – no longer bothered me. At this moment, our bodies were “thrown together” with the place (Massey, 2005). The coffee unfolded its effect, empathy took centre stage, and trust developed while the all-permeating control took a backseat.

5.2 *The Office: Sensing Trust as a Performative Act*

We strolled into C.'s office in a relaxed way, which made me realize a sense of trust had developed and surrounded us like a bubble. This feeling had been reinforced by the lightness of our steps and the friendliness of the interior, as if we could sense that the place was only tangible beyond our rational consciousness.

The colours and design make the stagnant summer heat in the room more bearable. The green from the plants, the stylish retro clock next to the door, and the colourful paintings on the wall all together evoke a peaceful atmosphere ... and mix with our strolling. (field note, 15.8.2023)

Brottveit (2018, p.204) describes how various events and types of prison materiality interact with each other. She emphasizes that disciplinary practices, space, smells, and people's physical proximity play a significant role. These elements contribute to affective encounters between human and non-human materiality. It becomes clear that the physical and sensory environment in a prison not only shapes people's experiences but also influences how they interact with each other and with their surroundings. The comfortable way in which we sat in a circle with our legs crossed and the ambiance created by the interior design contributed to the emergence of an atmosphere of trust. In this context, the prison atmosphere shifts to a dynamic that can foster change. This potential for transformation arises from the lived experiences of individuals within the prison and the specific circumstances surrounding the event (Turner et al., 2022, p. 12).

Then, C. handed M. a green and white folder with the documents for the first day of his professional training. In retrospect, if there had been an official reason for the counselling, it would have been the handing over of the folder. In the prison's penal and educational logic, the correction of the prisoner goes hand in hand with punishment, writes Foucault (1991, p.180). C. could have started the meeting in the conventional way, saying that the training programme's success depends on the authority's decision to move M. to the next progression level. At no point did she resort to subtle threats; instead, in a performative act, she moved her chair in his direction and wished him good luck

in his training. Her movement towards him and handing over the folder can be seen as an expression of embodied trust. Further, this points to the relational quality of trust (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023), as the following exchange demonstrates:

M.: That is quite a lot of material. [He takes the folder and leans back in a reflex-like moment, as if he retreats into his shell.]

C.: (To me) He is cognitively quite fit, and, yes, he must do a job that he can enjoy.

M.: (To me) She is a good surrogate mother. [He smiles.]

(field note, 15. 8. 2023)

If trust is not just an image of the body (embodiment) but also an expression of language (body language), it can be said that the initial shyness and awe M. expressed by hesitantly flipping through the PowerPoint printouts in the folder disappeared when C. responded to his uncertainty with a motherly tone that emphasized her trust in him.

The kind of maternal advocacy she used in the counselling is intended to avoid control in a broader sense and allows her to build trust with incarcerated people. Because trust is always mutual and reiterative (Bozalek, 2019), the brief verbal exchange illustrates the extent to which his body language reinforced her “maternal role” in prison. Finally, the atmosphere of comfort they created made the harshness that prevails in the coercive context disappear, at least for a moment.

6 Outside

Unlike Greenfield, which is a facility for measures and short sentences, Mountainview is solely for people with sentences. However, a significant number of incarcerated people have mental health problems and difficulties related to substance abuse. Most serve their whole sentence in this “open” setting, and the rest, around 25%, come to this prison from a closed setting, where they spent a large amount of their (mostly long) sentence. The “open” facility represents a step in the progression of the sentence.

Mountainview has a social service with several professionals covering individual case management and counselling as well as programmes for leisure activities and training programmes in social skills. Whereas social workers doing case management and counselling, discuss and work with the incarcerated people on an individual level, the leisure time educator offers a programme of meaningful leisure activities in groups. We will focus the analysis on these activities. They take place several evenings per week in 1.5- to 2-hour time slots or

as half- or whole-day events on weekends. The activities can take place within the prison perimeter or outside in the region (hiking tours, sledging, or indoor football in a community sports centre, public indoor swimming pool, museum, etc.). Usually, the educator is alone with a group of up to eight incarcerated people.

I (Julia) was allowed to participate in one of the activities – a walk in nature and a following stop for refreshments at a little shop. The lived experience and the vivid discussions with the participants and the educator about other activities they had done brought up various emotions and thoughts in me, which resonated with thinking about atmospheres of trust. I felt a sense of complicity and familiarity between them, suggesting a shared history based on previous excursions. Furthermore, due to the relatively small scale of the prison, informal regular contacts are the rule and facilitate trust-building moments (Johnsen et al., 2011). The convivial atmosphere affected me, and I immediately felt very comfortable and was able to shake off the tensions that come with being in prison.

At the same time, I was surprised by and a bit frightened about such an activity in the context of a prison for security reasons. I realised that I had embodied a constant feeling of waiting for “something to happen” due to the abundance of security measures and mistrust present in prisons. These contradictory feelings made me feel unsafe for a little while and prompted me to question my perceptions of incarcerated people, prison, and rehabilitation, as well as to relate these reflections to the phenomenon of incarceration as a whole and to our research interest in particular.

6.1 *The Outside as a Trust-Building Context*

The leisure activity took place on a warm summer evening after some rain showers. Three people showed up at the meeting point within the prison walls, and we agreed, at the educator’s suggestion, to go halfway up the mountainside for a nature walk. The presentation of the situation omits some parts of the event, as they appear in the field notes, and focusses on three specific moments that are instructive in elaborating on the concept of trust in its becoming.

We leave the fenced part of the prison through a back gate that the educator opens with his key. He unlocks the car parked outside. One of the incarcerated persons hurries up to open the passenger seat door for me and states that the three of them will be in the back. It seems to be important to him to show this gesture of courtesy. Then we are off. During the ten-minute drive, there is an almost exuberant atmosphere in the car. The men talk vivaciously, and the educator reveals the upcoming

ing temporal leaves for all of them. They make jokes about a festival taking place on this same weekend in the hometown region of the three. (field note, 3. 8. 2023)

Leaving the fenced part of the prison as a group was something familiar for the majority of the incarcerated people, for most of the workshops take place outside the fence. Leaving for a leisure activity, however, seemed an exciting and welcomed change, as it symbolized a movement away from the daily prison routine within the prison perimeter (Johnsen, 2018). Being in nature evokes emotions that are often suppressed in prison (Crewe et al., 2014) and, following Johnsen further, can be conceptualized as “process of becoming” and moving forward. Activities at a certain distance from the prison are particularly likely to promote such processes, as they suggest doing something “normal” that is usually out of reach for incarcerated people. Spatial, material, and immaterial elements (Anderson, 2009), such as leaving the prison and driving to another place, riding in the car, and forming a group for an activity outside, all contribute to this physically perceptible atmosphere of opening. By doing so, the participants are trusted by the educator – and the prison as an institution – to comply with the rules. This trust is linked to notions of coercion and control (Möllering, 2005), for it is supported by the relatively clear consequence that a breach of trust would mean a suspension of leisure activities for the individual or even for the whole group.

The atmosphere of being in the car in a good mood and becoming distanced physically from the prison allowed the participants to talk differently about issues that often have a more severe or administrative character inside the prison walls, such as preparing the highly regulated temporal leaves, which is the second of the educator’s core tasks, besides organizing the leisure activities. Due to this double role, the educator knew about the participants’ temporal leaves and talked to them about it on the trip. The convivial atmosphere outside the prison walls opened up alternative “spaces of trust” that allowed for comfortable discussions about the temporal leaves and the emotions, expectations, and joys around it. The incarcerated people experienced with their phenomenal body (Simonsen, 2013) the atmosphere that was unfolding. Getting fresh air during the leisure activities – a key objective of participants, as they told me several times throughout my observations – changes the narrow channelled vision within the walls.

We start our tour in the direction of a small lake. The rain has stopped completely, and the weather has become friendlier. We walk about an hour through meadows

and fields. [...] After a while, we come to a spot from where we can see the prison down in the valley. One of the participants comments on the view of the prison. The educator asks jokingly if they feel homesick. Everybody bursts out laughing. (field note, 3.8.2023)

Physical distance from the prison makes it possible for incarcerated people to share, for a short moment, feelings about their time in prison, even if it is just joking about the unlikely feeling of homesickness for the prison. The coercive setting of the prison, however, seems still to be present in terms of its immaterial rules (here meaning all the regulations for participating in leisure activities) that exert their power on incarcerated people while outside of the prison's premises. Control is not confined to the physical prison but stretches to discipline (Foucault, 1991) the incarcerated people even outside the walls. Nevertheless, standing shoulder to shoulder and looking in the same direction creates an atmosphere of temporary alliance. In post-humanist vocabulary, we read the educator's acting as "attunement to the world" (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023) of the participants. The educator takes their perspective and is interested in what they think right at that moment. Without pretending to know what they feel like, he starts a conversation with a joke and responds, by doing so, to the current atmosphere in the group. In a general sense, the natural environment allows one to step outside of the prison context of hierarchies and control and to experience a relationship with the educator, which certainly affects future work within the prison walls. The atmosphere of trust that emerges is profoundly mutual and relational (Bozalek, 2019). The educator trusts the incarcerated people to act "normal" on the outside of the prison, and they trust the educator with jokes, emotional talk, and personal comments they would not have made inside the prison. They rely on the fact that he does not report anything unless they breach basic rules, which again underscores the link between trust and control (Möllering, 2005). The inherent tension comes along with vulnerabilities (Bozalek, 2019) on both sides that open up space for caring activities in the sense of caring for the well-being of the respective other in the given situation, as we will see in the following section.

Back at the car, the educator explains that we would stop at a little shop on the way back to have some ice cream or refreshments. While driving, he explains to the one who is with the group for the first time that they can choose something for a maximum of six francs; he will pay and then take the money from their prison account. He insists that they must consume everything on site. It is apparently for-

bidden to take products back into prison. As we enter the shop, the shop assistant greets us welcomingly from behind the counter and says, "Finally I see you again!" in the direction of the educator. We have ice cream and drinks in front of the shop. The atmosphere is cheerful, particularly as one participant is joking a lot and telling funny stories. We stand in a circle, and everyone is involved in the conversation. It feels very normal for me. Suddenly, one of the participants sees a coin on the ground, picks it up, and looks at it. He then gives it quickly to the educator by saying with a laugh that he cannot take it. Another one says that this would result in an isolation cell for several days. The educator confirms that they are not allowed to take cash back to prison. They are talking and laughing about the situation. (field note, 3.8.2023)

Entering the community can be understood as another contact level with the outside world in which they were trusted to act appropriately. Shopping for refreshments and consuming them in a public space in front of the little shop created an atmosphere of life outside the penal system, which was used to foster discussion about experiences before and outside the prison context and omitting, for a short moment, the punitive element. The participants could thus experience normality and feel a sense of "belonging to a moral and political community", as Ugelvik (2022) puts it in, the Norwegian context. Feeling accepted and trusted to participate in activities in public space, such as consuming something at a shop, allows potentialities to unfold and flourish, to return to post-humanist concepts: The incarcerated persons experience themselves as people other than prisoners and are granted more agency than within the prison.

However, the materiality of money breaks with the performed "normality". The coin appearing on the ground had the potential to affect the participants. When it "entered" the atmosphere of chatting and feeling far away from prison, the constraining context of prison was suddenly brought to the present. The small materiality of the coin brought the whole power of control and discipline (Foucault, 1991) of the prison back, and dangerously challenged the atmosphere of trust. Interestingly, the participants did not choose to ignore the coin but started performing with it. By showing the educator clearly that they were aware of the rules and the consequences of breaking them, they presented themselves as trustworthy persons. They expertly played the game of trust control (Möllering, 2005) by showing that they knew how far trust goes and when control enters the game. The joking and laughing in the conversation revealed the will to counterbalance the seriousness of the consequences and hence the hard control in the system. Because the educator is not the person who decides

on the sanctions but rather works with the participants on the importance of respecting the rules, he can create this “space of trust” physically away from the prison but within the perimeter of the prison rules.

7

Closing remarks

We explored moments when we as researchers felt there was trust “in the air” within the prisons we studied. By understanding these moments through the lens of atmospheres of trust, we were able to trace the elements that, from a post-humanist perspective, let trust emerge. We traced how material elements (e. g., coffee, room design, nature, a coin, beverages at a shop) and non-material elements (e. g., prison rules) shaped these atmospheres. Although we analysed these moments as belonging to atmospheres of trust, it also became clear that trust is strongly linked to notions of control (Möllering, 2005) and institutional power (Foucault, 1991), as the finding of the coin demonstrated. These moments when atmospheres of trust could be felt, proved to be special and important in various dimensions.

Although trust is ephemeral and, most importantly, non-codified, we aimed to grasp it. Nevertheless, it constituted an important framing for the situations analysed in both prisons. Without trust, such a nature walk would not be possible, for it relies on a trusting relationship among the incarcerated people, the educator, and, ultimately, the institution. There is confidence that the participants will not take advantage of the situation. Additionally, in the counselling situation in the Greenfield prison, trust provided a basis for relational work with a person who had committed a serious offence. We could see that trust does not simply exist but is built in a reiterative and relational movement (Bozalek, 2019; Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023).

Trust therefore proved to be a way of appreciating others. Although prisons degrade people by foregrounding control (Foucault, 1991) and therefore forego their ability to make agreements and to take responsibility, trust communicates an acceptance of the other person as a full human being. It also refers to shared affectations, such as the smell of coffee and sensing the other person’s affectedness (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023). Trust counterbalances the strong power asymmetries in prisons, where incarcerated people are exposed to arbitrary decisions and rules of the system and feel helpless against the omnipresent institutional power (Foucault, 1991).

Nevertheless, trust is never absolute within prison or outside in society. The notion of “intelligent trust” (Liebling et al., 2019) makes this clear: Trust is only possible for feasible achievements, and there are always limits to trust. To trust blindly would be naïve. As we have shown, particularly inside the Green-

field prison, trust needed to be constituted, given, accepted, and given back. There is work behind an atmosphere of trust, and it has its limitations.

Trust is strongly linked to social work. On the one hand, relational work, as a basis for social work, leads to trustworthiness delimited by the framework of the coercive setting. On the other hand, as shown in our analysis, trust represents a major entry point for working with incarcerated people. It provides the basis to work on personal development, individual responsibility, and social behaviour. In particular, the moments analysed from the hike outside the Mountainview prison showed how the atmosphere of trust framed and came along with moments when potentialities became realised. These were moments when the incarcerated people acted and spoke differently from how they presented themselves inside the prison. These were moments of flourishing (Bozalek, 2019). In a coercive context, such as in a prison, such spaces and moments of trust seem crucial to us for creating possibilities of advancing in rehabilitation and reintegration into society, key elements in the missions of prisons.

The post-humanist approach we chose also shows that trust is not only about the relationship between two people but emerges through objects, smells, place and space. At the same time, atmospheres of trust are palpable, people are enveloped in these atmospheres and start to relax and joke, and, ultimately, they are affected by the atmospheres of trust. For social work, therefore, it seems pivotal to acknowledge the affective power of material and immaterial elements to co-create together with (non-)human elements atmospheres of trust as a basis for relational work. The coffee is an excellent example: It smells, it has flavour, it affects the body, and it has the potential to represent much more than just the act of drinking coffee.

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Notes

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- 2 <https://www.kriminalomsorgen.no/informasjon-paa-engelsk.536003.no.html> (accessed 11. 4. 2024).
- 3 Risk factors are defined based on a forensic-psychological analysis conducted by an external department (in German, *Abteilung für forensische und psychologische Abklärungen, AFA*).
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