Safety rules in a Norwegian high-security prison: The impact of social interaction between prisoners and officers

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how prison officers carry out safety rules, drawing on ethnographic data from a Norwegian high-security prison. Taking prisoners' status as a potential risk as the starting point, it analyses the ways in which social interaction between prison officers and prisoners affects how rules are implemented. Although several safety rules were complied with due to the highly rule-regulated work, the analysis highlight situations where social dynamics resulted in some disturbances to this compliance, when: (1) Situational human dynamics made rules inexpedient in specific situations, resulting in adaption and deviation; (2) Social strain in face-to-face interactions with prisoners made rules strenuous, leading to an avoidance tendency; (3) Human unpredictability made rules stabilising in uncertain situations and seemed to support compliance. Based on the results, it is argued for the importance of understanding and predicting social interaction when standardizing risk assessments through rules, where prison officers need to trade different kinds of considerations against others, rule compliance being only one of several considerations. Prison officers' situational sensitivity to human dynamics is an important part of safety work in both normal operations and crises, as well as the prison can implement uncertainty-reducing rules in particularly uncertain cases. The study complements existing research on safety rules by providing an ethnographic approach to the real-time use of safety rules within a new context, making interactionist perspectives highly relevant. The possible intersection of the concepts of safety and security are also addressed.

1. Introduction

High-security prisons constantly work to maintain safety and security (Sparks et al., 1996) with public safety as a paramount governmental objective of the Norwegian Correctional Service (NCS). This frontline work is highly rule-regulated, similar to many high-risk organisations (Bierly & Spender, 1995), and the rule-regulated safety and security work is performed by prison officers. Prison officers' compliance with safety rules is, therefore, a central means to achieve safe high-security prisons.

How safety rules are actually used in real time, however, is an ongoing discussion within safety science (Dekker, 2005; Hale & Borys, 2013a). Several studies have offered valuable insight into these questions, investigating how (and if) frontline workers in different occupations actually use safety rules aimed at controlling technological and natural risks (see, e.g. the general review in Hale & Borys, 2013a; Jahn, 2016 on high-reliability contexts and the review by Bye & Aalberg, 2020

of the maritime transportation industry). However, more research is needed to explore how rules are used in practice in a broader range of circumstances, especially through fieldwork methods (Bye & Aalberg, 2020; Hale & Borys, 2013b). This paper aims to answer this call through an ethnographic study of how safety and security rules are carried out in a Norwegian high-security prison. The methodology of the study involves moving the attention from rules as the starting point, to situated action, drawing on perspectives from e.g. Suchman (2007). Yet, this is a study of rule enactment and how social interaction impact on the use of rules. This paper is therefore a contribution to linking the two so-called paradigms within safety rules research, as suggested in Hale & Borys (2013b).

Studying high-security prisons involves new aspects in the study of safety rules. Central in this paper is that safety work in prison usually is characterised by social interaction with the source of risk due to the relatively close contact between officers and prisoners in Norwegian prisons. Social interaction is therefore an important characteristic of

rule-regulated safety work in prison. Social interaction makes people "take account of what other people are doing or are about to do, and [people] are on that basis forced to handle situations from what they take into account" (Blumer, 1969, p. 8). Interaction has previously been found to influence the use of safety rules in other organisations, but this is limited to interaction amongst frontline workers and management. In prison, however, and in several other comparable occupations as police officers, psychiatric nurses and firefighters, social interaction also occurs between frontline safety workers and "clients", or, in this case, prisoners as the considered source of risk. In this paper, I argue for the importance of understanding and predicting social interaction when standardizing risk assessments through rules. Within the social environment of the prison, officers need to trade different kinds of considerations against others, rule compliance being only one of several considerations.

Another new aspect to the study of safety rules, as well as safety in general, is that prison officers are responsible for both safety and security as a primary objective, which are related areas and interact in several ways in the workplace (Boustras, 2020). This interface of safety and security is opposite to work contexts where workers relate mainly to technological or natural risks, as is the focus in the existing literature on safety rules. The main intention of safety rules in prison is to control people as a source of risk, where prisoners are seen as a possible threat to the prison system, the people in it and society outside. While discussion is ongoing amongst scholars about whether safety and security should be seen as two sides of the same coin or if they should be treated as two separate scientific fields (Bieder & Gould, 2020), for the purpose of this paper I follow the definition of safety stated by Aven (2014), which moderates the differences between the two concepts, seeing safety as a state "with no occurrence of undesirable events and consequences" (p. 16). Safety rules are therefore here understood as rules aimed at achieving such a state, including both intentional and unintentional acts and events. Hale and Borys (2013a) argue that safety rules should not be conceptually isolated from the rules regulating all other actions in organisations, which supports a moderation of the distinction between safety and security in this context. This understanding also agrees with how the informants in this study used the concept, which in Norwegian is *sikkerhet*, including both safety and security. I believe it is more useful to draw on insights from safety science in this setting and highlight what unifies and what differentiates the two concepts rather than relate to security rules as something entirely different.

Despite the explicit objective of safety and rules as the means of implementation, however, little research exists on how such rules are actually enacted in frontline prison work and what this means for safety. The literature on prisons has, however, identified a widespread pattern of discretion, or so-called under-use of power, amongst prison officers in the enforcement of rules in general (Liebling, 2000). Violation of rules is also sometimes emphasised as part of the cause after crisis situations in prisons occur (e.g. SOU, 2005 on prison escapes in Sweden and Useem & Kimball, 1989 on prison riots in the U.S.), in accordance with findings from other sectors (Dekker, 2005; Hopkins, 2011). While research in the aftermath of unwanted events can offer important insights, such events are closely connected to normal operations (Roux-Dufort, 2007). Research on normal operations is therefore needed (Bourrier, 2002) and will add valuable knowledge important for prison safety. This paper highlights the social characteristics of prison safety work, interacting with prisoners as the source of risk, by investigating the following research question:

In what ways does social interaction between prison officers and prisoners affect how the officers carry out safety rules?

Answering this question is important to deepen the understanding of how safety rules are carried out in a social prison environment because rules are a widespread means to achieve the safety objective in prisons. Given the fact that deviations from standards can be seen as a "defining feature of normal operations" in organisations (Hodson et al., 2013, p. 268) and the important role that safety rules have in governing safety work in prisons, there are few empirical studies investigating these

matters.

I will now give a brief introduction to Norwegian high-security prisons before I present the theoretical framework and the methodology of the study. Then the findings will be presented and discussed.

1.1. The context: Norwegian high-security prisons

Norway has just over 3600 prison cells, where the largest prison has about 400 cells (KDI, 2021). Norwegian prisons are divided into two security levels: low- and high-security. The main goals of the NCS are two-fold: to ensure the safety of society (including staff and prisoners) by a proper execution of remand and prison sentences and to prevent recidivism by enabling prisoners to change their criminal behaviour. Norwegian prison staff receive a two-year education at the University College of the Norwegian Correctional Service (UCNCS) and are, at least according to best practice, present and interact with prisoners throughout most of the day (European Penitentiary Training Academies [EPTA], 2021). The officers are unarmed, wearing only a panic button in everyday duty, but they are allowed to use coercive measures when necessary. All prison officers are trained and are responsible for intervening with physical force when necessary (EPTA, 2021). The Norwegian prison officer, therefore, has several roles in relation to the prisoners, being a safety guard with the authority to intervene physically at the same time as participating in everyday life on the wings and working towards the prisoners' rehabilitation and welfare.

2. Safety rules

Safety rules are a "way of behaving in response to a predicted situation, established before the event and imposed upon those operating in the system, by themselves or others, as a way of improving safety or achieving a required level of safety" (Hale & Swuste, 1998, p. 165). In this paper, the concept of safety rules is used in a broad sense within this definition's framework. Hale and Swuste (1998) separate safety rules into three categories, based on the degree of discretion involved. Performance goals define which goals should be achieved but not how to achieve them. This kind of rule involves much discretion for the people who are obliged to fulfil it. Examples could be the rule that prison officers should "maintain peace and order". Process rules, by contrast, define how and by whom decisions should be made, such as the use of job safety analysis before specific work tasks. Lastly, action rules define concrete action, removing almost all freedom of choice for the professional. While there are several performance goals for safety work in prisons, both process and action rules are widely used, meaning that the discretional space often is relatively small. Timmermans and Berg (2003, p. 26) point out that these kinds of rules "boost the stakes of standardisation to the highest level", attempting to achieve "the seemingly impossible: prescribe the behaviour of professionals".

Safety research has confirmed that prescribing behaviour through rules is extremely difficult; there is a well-documented gap between safety rules and actual work practices (Dekker, 2005; Lofquist et al., 2017; Reason, 1990, 1997). The field is separated between two so-called paradigms of how this gap is understood, where safety rules are seen, respectively as a sort of "gold standard" and as guidelines for action (Dekker, 2005; Hale & Borys, 2013a). Human action is therefore understood within different frameworks of, respectively, compliance/ violation and skilful adaptions. The compliance/violation logic focuses on how to control human action, that is, getting safety workers to comply with rules. The other perspective understands rules as situated socially constructed patterns of behaviour (Hale & Borys, 2013a, p. 211), often emphasising workers' knowledge and skills. I would argue, however, that distinguishing research on safety rules in two conflicting paradigms (Dekker 2005) seems to overstate the case. The body of knowledge on safety rules should rather be seen as based on a plurality of complementing perspectives and methodologies.

Existing research has given valuable insight on a variety of aspects

relevant for the use of safety rules. Some scholars have identified the importance of framing of risk and safety in relation to rules, and the trade-off between rule compliance and other salient considerations (e.g. Horlick-Jones, 2005 on police officers; Koukia et al., 2010, on mental health nurses; Sanne, 2008 on railway technicians). Others, studying a number of occupations, has demonstrated that experienced workers often draw on their experience rather than rules (e.g. Klein 2009; Knudsen, 2009; Koukia et al., 2010), as well as integrating rules into practice by using rules as tools to expand their options, often in hazardous environments (see e.g. Almklov 2018; Hollnagel, 2014; Jahn, 2016; Weick, 1993). Some studies have also found that perceptions of actual risk seem to result in more reliance on rules and procedures than on discretion (e.g. Butler et al. 2021 on firefighters; Sørensen & Kruke 2020 on prison officers).

In Suchman's (2007) seminal work, she does not see plans (e.g. rules) as superior, but as representations of situated action. Although safety rules are often seen as unavoidable in hazardous work (Bierly & Spender, 1995; Jahn, 2016), stressing the importance of situated action results in seeing rules as resources for, more than determining of, action (Suchman 2007, p. 72). Almklov (2018) argues that it is not a matter of rules versus improvisation, but of how rules and procedures may support or hamper situational improvisation. While rules are explicit "arrangements awaiting interpretation" (Reynaud, 2005, p. 22), work practices are more implicit, involving interpretation. This is because a main characteristic of rules is that they can only offer theoretical, general responses, while real-time work practices are pragmatic solutions to concrete problems.

Reynaud (2005, p. 866) stresses that routines (what I call work practices) are not mindless, but "*sense-making* repetitions" (my italics). This *sense* in work practices has been documented within the maritime industry, for instance, where the concept of "good seamanship" denotes the totality of practical skills "necessary for being a proper seaman" – contrasting with rule compliance (Bye & Aalberg, 2020). Bye and Aalberg suggest that many rules are understood as devaluing workers' competence. Pettersen (2013) emphasises the skills of dealing with anomalies when solving problems in aircraft maintenance work, where technicians manage the inherent uncertainty in procedures by "a constant sensitivity to empirical signals" (p. 112). Deviations from rules are here understood as knowledgeable creativity in response to changing conditions bringing anomalies requiring different forms of knowledge and actions to what is standardised in rules. Deviations from rules can vary from small adjustments to "near total re-invention" (Weick, 1998, as cited in Feldman & Pentland, 2003), and as such, rules are understood as resources for action. They do not fully determine action because enactment is inherently improvisational (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 102).

These perspectives applied to the study of safety rules infer that there are situations where compliance to rules in fact can be dangerous and counteractive for safety (e.g. Grote & Weichbrodt, 2007; Perin, 2005; Pettersen, 2013) and where the ability to "drop your rules" (Heldal & Dehlin, 2017) is vital for situation management. Sometimes safety systems therefore work well *because* of rule deviations, not despite them (Pettersen, 2013, p. 108). Grote and Weichbrodt (2007), therefore, argue for a diverse view of standardisation and flexibility, emphasising the need for operators to cope competently in situations where uncertainty is high. A diverse view of standardisation and flexibility is in line with Hale & Borys' (2013b, p. 229) conclusion that, dependent of context, work has to be done "to arrive at a compromise which encompasses both standardisation and flexibility".

2.1. Social interaction

Work environments consist not merely of people acting, but of people acting towards each other and thus engaging in social interaction (Blumer, 1969, p. 10). Blumer underlines the same attention to situational interpretation as outlined above by arguing that interpretations of concrete situations are the basis for social action. When work situations include social dynamics, social interaction should therefore be taken into account when understanding how the interpretation of rules happens. Blumer (1969) states:

> In the face of the actions of others, one may abandon an intention or purpose, revise it, check or suspend it, intensify it, or replace it. The actions of others enter to set what one plans to do, may oppose or prevent such plans, may require revision of such plans and may demand a very different set of such plans. One has to *fit* one's own line of activity in some manner to the actions of others. (p.8)

This makes social interaction symbolic, meaning that people interpret others' actions rather than merely react to them, and therefore people's actions are based on the meaning which they attach to others' actions. Sensitivity towards other people and the ability to adjust one's interpretations of others' actions is therefore essential in social interaction. One way interaction shapes action is in negotiating activity as one of several ways of "getting things accomplished when people need to deal with each other to get those things done" (Strauss, 1978, p. 234).

Social interaction has been identified as impacting on the use of safety rules in several previous studies (e.g. Almklov et al., 2014; Borys, 2012; Dahl, 2013; Jahn, 2016; Kudesia et al., 2020; Weick, 1993). As stated in the introduction, however, little research has focused on social interaction between frontline workers and their "clients". Yet, some of the research referenced in the section above has studied occupations which combines a responsibility to protect others and themselves, as Butler et al. (2021) and Sanne (2008). A few studies also specifically focus on the impact of direct interaction with people as the source of risk, as Horlick-Jones (2005) and Koukia et al. (2010). These matters need to be further investigated, which this paper contributes to by studying prison officer work where both rules and social interaction is central. Social interaction between prison officers and prisoners is found to be "the heart of prison work" (Liebling et al., 2010), linking interaction and order (Liebling et al., 2010; Sparks et al., 1996; Sykes, 1958). General rule enforcement is characterised by negotiations that are understood as officers "underusing" power by extensive use of discretion, because the rules matter, but sometimes social relations matters even more (Liebling, 2000). This identifies a tension between social interaction and the enforcement of rules, which is illustrated in Sørensen and Kruke (2020), where strict safety action rules included a rule for officers that minimised interaction with a high-risk prisoner. The significance of social interaction between officers and prisoners has therefore been identified, and to some extent also problematised, in previous research when it comes to safety.

3. Data and methods

This paper draws on ethnographic data about safety work in a Norwegian high-security prison. The study is exploratory, whereby the theoretical concepts informing the initial observational and analytical work were the broad categories of risk and safety.

3.1. The field context

Safety rules as central means to achieve safe high-security prisons is illustrated in how prison officers' daily work is structured by such rules. Prison officers are both following and enforcing rules from when they enter the prison at the beginning of their watch until they leave. To enter the prison, the officers need to go through several safety procedures. Their bags are scanned, they go through metal detectors, and a string of doors is locked up and shut before they can enter their wing. The prisoners are counted several times a day, and the headcount is reported and recorded. This has an important safety function to control that all the prisoners are present and alive, considering the risk of escape as well as suicide, self-harm and acute illness while locked up alone in a cell over

time. Another daily routine for prison officers is to demand urine samples from prisoners as a safety measure to check for the presence of drugs, which is also performed with several safety procedures. When prisoners move inside the prison outside their own wing, there are procedures for following them, locking doors, reporting and searching them at several metal detector points. The cells are checked in the morning with a procedure whereby the officers, for instance, check that the cell window is intact, and usually cells and common areas are also searched more thoroughly. This kind of rule-regulated safety work, through procedural and action rules, continues all day and night. Besides this routine work, the officers also respond to sudden events, such as fire alarms and panic buttons. On these occasions, the officers drop everything and go straight into the procedures for handling acute events. There are procedures for how to apprehend a prisoner, how to enter a cell when having to remove a prisoner, how to put out a fire as a team and so on. Nearly everything in the prison is regulated by safety rules, from the performance goals of "maintaining safety in your prisoner group" to detailed rules and procedures for, for instance, where to position oneself while guarding the yard, driving a car transporting a prisoner and when opening a cell door at night.

Because everyday life in prison is structured by safety rules to a great extent, high-security prisons make interesting research sites for the study of such rules and how people on the ground use – or do not use – these. Rules was not a concept I was looking for in the field; however, it was clearly present in the data material.

3.2. Fieldwork

The empirical data in this study were generated from fieldwork in a high-security prison in Norway between August and December 2018. The fieldwork included participant observation and informal interviews with prison employees, mainly prison officers and duty officers[1]. Participant observation offers a useful method to observe situated and interactive work, particularly in exploring aspects that informants take for granted (Fangen, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The informal interviews were important, however, because what people mean by their actions cannot be directly observed. The advantage of informal interviews in the field is that the informants' accounts are situated in their everyday context (Becker, 1996). The combination of actions and situated accounts is an advantage of ethnography (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Because I was given my own keys, I could observe interesting places and situations in the prison by moving around independently. I showed up at certain wings and times as agreed and moved around the prison to participate in other situations in other places when this seemed interesting. The work I observed included running the wings, and many rule-regulated safety tasks around the prison area. I observed in several regular wings where prisoners were allowed to associate with each other outside their cells at daytime, and one isolation wing where prisoners were locked up 23 h a day. I also attended several teaching and training lessons with trainee prison officers.

The preconceptions informing my research design reflect my background as a criminologist, former prison officer and present member of staff at the UCNCS. This provided me with a framework for interpreting and exploring my findings. My initial position in the prison field was a practical one. Edelman (1997, p. 19f) argues for including such practical logic into the analytical work, in order to understand the complexity of "living-in-the-world" contrasted to "the scholarly gaze". My prison background seemed important to the officers in two respects: I could "take care of myself" as they said, so they did not have to look after me as they did with other non-officers on the wings, and I "got it" (for instance,

that the so-called black humour[2] was not as bad as it can sound). Therefore, many explained that they did not feel that they needed to exercise restraint when I was present. It could be that this attitude to my presence contributed to the fact that I obtained much data on what the officers did not do, even if they were supposed to do it, as with deviance from the safety rules. The trust I was given as a former prison officer says something about the tacit knowledge of safety, which they assumed I implicitly understood.

Sharing background with your informants, however, has important potential limitations which needs to be addressed. One way of dealing with my "blind spots" was to ask descriptive questions as well as make detailed descriptive field notes (Spradley, 1980) focusing on thick descriptions (Geertz 1973). In order to counter that informants did not explain things because they assumed that I already knew, I used much time emphasizing my interest in *their* view and that my role was different, as well as that my own experience was not necessarily relevant for their work in this prison at this time. Although my impression was that they, after some time, was used to my numerous and naïve questions that needed expanded explanations, I consider it certain that some aspects with their work were not visible to me as a result of our common tacit knowledge.

The prison is large in the Norwegian context, housing both people remanded in custody and sentenced prisoners divided across several wings. Several occupational groups work in the prison, from nurses, psychologists, priests and teachers, to prison officers on different hierarchical levels. The officers worked in different prison wings, housing various numbers and categories of prisoners. Most wings I attended were standard; however, one wing had a special focus on prisoners with special needs, while another was an isolation wing. Due to anonymity considerations, the prison will not be described further.

This study concentrated on safety work on the blue line from the perspectives of prison officers working on the frontline. This left out several other interesting perspectives from prisoners, managers and other staff. When other occupational groups were present in the prison officers' work situations, however, they were included as informants. The prison officers were organised hierarchically: temporary, unskilled staff working as prison officers, trainees studying at the UCNCS working there as part of their required practical training, trained prison officers, administrative managers, operative managers, senior managers and the prison governor. I focused on skilled operational work; therefore, most of my informants were prison officers, trainees and duty officers. These officers were both male and female, although the duty officers were almost all male. All ages were represented, from young trainees to officers soon to retire on a pension. I did not select the informants beyond the initial decision that the informants should be prison officers; I showed up on the agreed wings, asking those who happened to be at work to allow me to be present that day. This gave a broad representation of age, sex and work experience amongst the informants.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Scientific Data Services and follows the rules of the European Union General Data Protection Regulation. All the staff and prisoners received written information about the study, and I asked for oral consent to participate in all situations where this was possible. No one refused to take part in the study; there were, however, a few situations in which I did not find it appropriate to participate. Ethical considerations, both for prisoners in vulnerable situations and for the risk of escalating tense situations by my presence, are a challenge when studying prison officers' work.

3.3. Analysis

While at the research site, I jotted down observations in a notebook during the observations and interviews or as soon as possible after. The analytical work started after the first day in the field by writing out the

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[1] Duty officer positions is held by prison officers, usually with many years' experience. Duty officers have the twenty-four hours' operative responsibility for safety in the whole prison, and are the only managers working shift.

[2] "Vaktbokshumor" in Norwegian

jottings into field notes and coding the material as soon as possible after the end of each session. The code "To comply with rules" was created one week into the fieldwork, and a few weeks later, I created the sub-code "The use of discretion". This early creation of codes related to rules, although I did not direct my observations particularly towards it, illustrates the importance of rules in the safety work. I read through the entire data material several times to become familiar with the material as a whole. After repeatedly reading through the whole material, I started working on whether the initial codes created during the fieldwork still seemed appropriate or if it was necessary to make adjustments. While I was open to everything relevant to safety and risk when starting the fieldwork, my interest in safety rules and social interaction emerged based on an abductive process (cf. Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), alternating between reading the field notes and the literature on safety rules. I carried out a thematic analysis of the data included in the relevant codes, in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006). In the analytical process, I repeatedly differentiated and reviewed the data and the categorisation of themes to explore how prison officers enacted safety rules and specifically how the social dynamics between officers and prisoners affected these practices. Three themes emerged as particularly relevant to answer the research question, and these will now be presented.

All the field notes were written in Norwegian, and the excerpts included in this article have therefore been translated, with minor grammatical and aesthetic adjustments.

4. Findings: rule enactment and the impact of social interaction between prison officers and prisoners

I will now explore how safety rules were carried out within the special characteristics of the prison context, where the source of risk is people and where the officers were interacting closely with these people. Most of the operative safety work, including the enactment of safety rules, aimed to reduce the risk represented by prisoners. This work was often, but not always, carried out in close interaction with the prisoners as a result of working in an institution where officers were responsible for running the prison wings in general and not only maintaining safety. Social interaction with prisoners was therefore an inseparable part of the job, a job that for a great part was structured by safety rules. Even if the officers did not interact directly with the prisoners while enacting every safety rule, they would face them shortly afterwards and stay together in the same environment over weeks, months and often years. This relational characteristic of the work is important for understanding the context of the following findings.

The findings are presented in three main themes: first, situational human dynamics made rules inexpedient in specific situations and consequently resulted in deviance and adaption. Second, social pressure in face-to-face negotiations with prisoners made the rules bothersome and thus supported an avoidance tendency. Third, human unpredictability made rules stabilising in uncertain situations and seemed to increase compliance.

4.1. Rules do not fit human dynamics

This theme encapsulates how many rules did not fit the social dynamic they were enacted in, resulting in prison officers deviating from what they experienced as inexpedient rules. These deviations were based on a judgement of necessity, very often in relation to experienced risk, and ranged from small adjustments to clear deviations.

First, deviations were carried out in acute situations where the rules made it difficult to solve the work task by complying with the rules. A practice supervisor emphasised this point while lecturing trainees about the procedures for using physical force:

One can be deadlocked as to how one is supposed to do certain tasks, for instance the procedure for how to deal with an arm in the use of

physical force [how to control the prisoners' arms when apprehending]. But, sometimes, what you have learned doesn't correspond with that particular situation. (Field notes written during the lecture)

Being in the middle of action, the circumstances would often shift in a way that neither static rules nor existing knowledge could necessarily help to solve, which resulted in situational adaption of rules. In this kind of work, this mostly was about changes in both social and physical interaction with prisoners, where the human aspect made it a highly dynamic work situation. These dynamics implied that the work practices were based on independent situated judgements, often deviating from the rules and procedures because of the inherent interpretative flexibility of the enactment (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Such work practices were mostly performed when work was regulated by detailed action rules in dynamic situations, where decisions had to be made quickly without time for contemplation. Another example was a repeating situation triggering what almost developed into a routine of violations of a particular rule during night shifts. The repeatedly violated rule was regulating the number of prisoners allowed to be unlocked from their cells at the same time at night, in order to avoid prisoners overpowering officers at a moment of low staffing. The situations causing the rule violation was an aggressive prisoner who was perceived as difficult to handle with the resources available. The situations were of such a kind that many officers became concerned about the prisoner's health. As attempts to solve the situation, officers decided to let out one or more fellow prisoners to help them calm down the aggressive prisoner. Although it did not seem to be a common explanation for these violations among the decision-makers, the impact of human dynamics appeared in most accounts: a person in need of help, the violent potential of this person being "a huge guy" with related considerations for their own ability to handle the situation, and judgements about the helping prisoners' trustworthiness. All these complex considerations of human dynamics worked together in a situation many experienced as acute.

While adaption to human dynamics in an acute situation in the first example seemed necessary for safety, the last example illustrates a situation where adaption seemed to reduce one type of risk (related to the prisoner's health) at the same time as constituting another kind of risk (related to officers' and other prisoners' safety). Adaption to human dynamics in emergency situations, therefore, was performed in a broad range of situations, and sometimes the result seemed unarguably successful for safety. At other times, the result was more ambiguous, possibly implying a threat to the prison's core values and structures.

Second, deviations were also common in routine situations. In these situations, the rules were not deviated from because it would be difficult to solve the task otherwise but because applying the rule was seen as *unnecessary*. This was, therefore, more about deviations from than adaptions of rules. The judgement of unnecessity was played out in two different ways.

One kind of judgement was grounded on the experience of low risk. An example is the following excerpt from the field notes, which shows how an experienced officer related to a rule saying there should never be only one prison officer together with prisoners inside the yard. If there is only one officer present, this officer should always go outside the fence. I was standing in the yard with the officer and a trainee when the officer had to go, leaving the trainee alone inside the yard:

The trainee asked if she was supposed to go outside the fence in the meantime (as the rule says). The prison officer hesitated and said the trainee should judge for herself, suggesting that she could go outside the fence if she felt uncomfortable being alone. After some thinking, the trainee decided to go by the book [...]. When the prison officer came back, I asked what would make her go outside the fence if she was standing there alone. She explained that the prisoners in the yard that day were "a bunch of old men with rollators". If she had not been

familiar with the prisoners in the yard, or if she had been familiar with them and on that basis judged them as a potential risk, however, she would have gone outside the fence. (Field notes)

The existence of a rule was not part of her reasoning; instead, she adjusted her actions to the prisoners in the yard based on her "gut feeling" in the moment, acquired from interaction with those prisoners. This is in line with the findings in Koukia et al. (2010) on how psychiatric nurses judged risk as a basis for whether they should use security measures. Although the officers carried out several safety rules on every watch, this way of situationally judging risk and consequently downscaling safety measures was at the same time widespread amongst the officers with some work experience. While the examples above illustrate how deviations can be understood as the adaption of rules in acute situations, this last example shows another way deviation from rules can work in routine situations. In acute situations, adaptive work practices were required because it is impossible to standardise exactly how human interaction will proceed. In routine situations, however, the officers' sensitivity to variations in situations and behaviour amongst prisoners led to officers judging the necessity of the rules. The rules did not contain the knowledge or flexibility needed to help the officers navigate the human dynamics at the centre of safety work.

The other kind of judgement of the unnecessity of safety rules was when the officers did not believe that compliance with a particular rule would reduce risk. There was widespread experience of flaws in the consistency of safety measures in this prison, resulting in several officers seeing tasks such as controlling prisoners in the metal detector as unnecessary. This was directly related to the many possibilities for prisoners to "outsmart" the measures in order to evade the control. The officers fitted their own lines of activity not only to the actions of others (Blumer, 1969, p. 8), but also to the possible actions of prisoners in relation to prisoners' general status as a potential risk. Knowledge of system vulnerabilities, therefore, resulted in deviations from rules as a direct consequence of prison officers relating to prisoners as a risk source.

Being sensitive to human dynamics and consequently adapting and deviating from safety rules on the basis of this sensitivity seemed to be central to how the prison officers carried out rule-regulated safety work.

4.2. Rules enacted under social strain

This theme captures how strain related to face-to-face interactions with reluctant prisoners sometimes seemed to tend towards avoidance of enacting such rules as a consequence of rules becoming bothersome. The following extract from the field notes illustrates how this appeared in officers' accounts. The extract was written during a conversation between several officers discussing whether there should be a rule saying prisoners' bodies and cells should be searched routinely when refusing to provide a urine sample, which is an important safety intervention in prisons. Some officers mentioned the low probability of finding drugs by means of such searches.

However, what they seem to be most concerned with is that it would be difficult to carry it out in practice if they were supposed to do this "every time someone refuses". There is low staffing, and such situations is a lot of fuss. An officer points out that if there is too much fuss about such tasks, it would be easy to refrain from doing it; you choose prisoners other than the ones you know will refuse and consequently create a lot of work. (Field notes)

The strain of handling frustrated prisoners was, however, seldom explicitly stated as a reason for deviating from the rules amongst the experienced officers. One officer explicitly mentioned the possibility of officers being avoidant on duty as a direct consequence of fearing sanctions from prisoners. Uncomfortableness with "setting limits" for prisoners was, however, a very common issue amongst the trainees. Such strain seemed to affect the enactment of the rules to some extent.

Several officers did not seem to consider prisoners' reactions when judging whether they would intervene in a situation or not. Others, however, saw the possibility of provoking prisoners as a risk, for instance, by perceived unnecessary compliance to rules. Provoking prisoners could escalate a situation, a way of reasoning also found amongst police officers (Bittner, 1967; Horlick-Jones, 2005). Having to handle provoked prisoners was also often seen as a hiccup in the daily prison machinery. Related to this, several officers expressed attitudes of taking shortcuts if safety rules would involve too much "hassle" for the everyday running of the prison wings. This could result in little noticeable choices, such as picking out prisoners who would not make trouble when carrying out safety interventions (for instance cell searching), compared to the ones that really should be searched due to safety considerations. This is not a deviation from the rule per se but is a way to avoid the intention of safety rules. Maslen and Ransan-Cooper (2017) describe this way of complying with safety standards as "compliance as process", where rules are complied with superficially, but where considerations other than safety in reality are directing the work.

This could be understood as a trade-off between different considerations, where the rules are losing ground to the advantage of competing goals. Similar trade-off's is found in Sanne's (2008) study of railway technicians.

The way expected prisoner reactions seemed to impact the face-to-face enactment of safety rules demonstrated a negotiating aspect (Strauss, 1978) of rule enactment, highlighting how close social interaction with prisoners plays a part in forming officers' actions towards rule deviation. Due to the negotiation involved in situated interaction during the enactment of some specific kinds of safety rules, several officers stressed the importance of training on relationally challenging safety work. The use of physical force was a frequently used example, which is strictly regulated by rules to avoid abuse of power but is allowed when necessary to enforce the prison rules for order and safety. This pushes both rule-regulated safety work and social interaction to the limit, where baton use was a frequently discussed example. The officers emphasised the challenges of being mentally ready to strike another person with a weapon in order to be able to enact these rules. This illustrates an additional aspect, with the enactment of safety rules involving strenuous human dynamics.

4.3. Rules stabilising human unpredictability

The last theme concerns how compliance with rules was distinguished in a few specific situations and for some specific kind of rules, where rules were seen as a stabiliser. These rules stand in sharp contrast to a generally low orientation to written rules. To illustrate this, I will first use what was called (rule) regimes on the isolation wing as a case and thereafter how the rules were used and associated with new prison officers and trainees.

Regimes refers to a temporary set of action rules regulating how to act safely when handling specific prisoners on the isolation wing. The introduction of regimes was usually based on recent and repeated violent behaviour, implying enhanced risk and uncertainty associated with those prisoners. Examples of rules included in such regimes were rules for the number of officers present when opening the cell door (beyond the general rule of two), and the required use of protective equipment and handcuffs amongst other things. Close interaction with the prisoners made these rules important to take care of the officers' personal safety, in addition to a general means of controlling the situation. I did not observe such a rule regime during the fieldwork. The way officers talked about these regimes, however, contrasting their own compliance to the general rules, indicated support for the regimes. It seemed clear that the officers' awareness of enhanced risk and uncertainty in these cases was important for the respect of the regimes. Awareness of risk was connected to recent threatening or aggressive behaviour, while unpredictability in the social relations with a certain prisoner led to uncertainty. One officer said that in such unpredictable situations he did not want to

be "left with discretion". This concurs with the findings in Butler et al. (2021) on firefighters, which tended to rely on rules rather than discretion even if the use of discretion was licensed. The perception of human lives at risk seemed to support rule compliance, which Butler et al. suggest could be explained by extrinsic stress limiting the attentional resources needed to perform discretional and situational judgements.

The importance of the prison officers' own experience of uncertainty, however, may indicate that this could perhaps be more about a concurrence between these particular rules and the officers' experiences than all *compliance* with rules, as there is a thin line separating rule compliance from sense-making work practices (Reynaud, 2005, p. 22). Sanne (2014, p. 212) suggests the same in his analysis of railway technicians' safety work: "Often, these practices might be legitimized with reference to safety procedures, but probably their origin is their experience rather than the rule book".

Independent of whether the enhanced support towards rules is mainly about compliance with rules or concurrent rules and work practices, however, it seems as if awareness of risk and uncertainty could be seen as a key to get safety rules integrated as part of the community of practice (Almklov, 2018, p. 69). When human judgement was seen as too unstable to manage the situation, rule regimes could be used to change the usual premises of social dynamics. Thus, detailed action rules were a welcome factor to reduce uncertainty for many officers by stabilising the situation. Rules included as part of regimes were typical anticipatory measures (like using protective equipment and having several officers present) and were carried out before prisoners were let out of their cell, which means the rules usually were possible to be completely complied with. This controllable environment is a special characteristic with some parts of prison work, which contrasts with the dynamic, fast shifting environment characterising other parts.

The stability and support of rules also seemed to be appreciated by many new staff. For inexperienced or new officers lacking interactional experience with prisoners, it was difficult to navigate uncertainty using situational sensitivity based on relations. In such cases the rules became important. Several experienced officers explicitly stated that many precautious rules were meant as safety barriers for newcomers and did not apply to themselves, echoing the findings in Knudsen's (2009) study of seafarers. One rule important for new staff in prison was the rule regulating how to open cell doors to avoid being attacked by the prisoner inside. According to several experienced officers, this rule was meant to ensure that inexperienced officers did not let prisoners out from their cells without making a well-grounded risk assessment first. As one officer stated, "You cannot make these judgements without knowing the prisoners". Novices lacking an understanding of the social dynamics needed to make the necessary risk assessments as a basis for situated decisions about safety therefore needed to comply with the general precautious rules.

5. Discussion: enacting safety rules in a tense social environment

The main aim of this study was to explore the ways in which social interaction between prison officers and prisoners affects how officers carry out safety rules on the basis of prisoners' status as a potential risk. The rule-regulated safety work was played out as interacting and negotiating practices as part of the ongoing process of making sense and meaning of safety issues and rules in everyday work. Social interaction was of great significance for how the safety rules were carried out and affected rule enactment in three important ways. First, situational human dynamics made rules inexpedient in specific situations and consequently resulted in deviance and adaption. Second, social pressure in face-to-face negotiations with prisoners made rules bothersome, thus supporting an avoidance tendency. Third, human unpredictability made rules stabilising and seemed to increase compliance to reduce uncertainty. The undetermined and unstable quality of both action and social

interaction, therefore, made rule enactment dynamic practices, based on officers' sensitivity directed towards variations in and expectations of behaviour, as well as rules, important when officers lacked the social sensitivity to juggle situations. Enacting safety rules in prison, therefore, seemed to be a balancing act between the ability to adapt when necessary, ease tensions when needed and at the same time having an eye to the vulnerabilities of human judgement while dealing with uncertainty. Often this balancing act resulted in a trade-off between rule compliance and other salient considerations, sometimes between different safety precautions.

I will now discuss these findings against the research question and theory on safety rules.

Although several rules were complied with every day, the findings emphasise situations representing something other than habitual rule compliance. Both deviations and distinguished compliance formed when some sort of disturbance appeared, making it necessary to move from habitual to interpretative practice. The study focuses on such disturbances formed from social interaction, ranging from prisoner apprehension not proceeding as expected, via uncomfortable interactions complicating prescribed action, to social hunches adjusting interventions up- or downwards. As Pettersen (2013, p. 108) points out in the case of aircraft maintenance work, the actual work necessary to maintain daily operations involves a social system not often accounted for in safety research. Existing research therefore suggests that rules sometimes should be deviated from to maintain safety (Hollnagel, 2014; Jahn, 2016; Perin, 2005; Pettersen, 2008; Weick, 1993). Most previous studies, however, have been conducted in high-risk environments investigating the use of rules in association with an ongoing crisis. However, building on an understanding of both action and interaction as inherently interpretative (Blumer 1969; Feldman & Pentland, 2003) and previous empirical work on normal operations (Perin, 2005; Pettersen, 2008), I argue that the skill of being able to adjust to reality in times of crisis also involves the same skill in normal operations.

The study reveals a widespread practice of downscaling or deviating from "unnecessary" rules. There are several possible explanations for this practice. One explanation could be that it is the result of "rule fatigue" in a highly regulated work setting. The problem with daily rules developed to maintain control based on worst-case scenarios (e.g. always having two officers present when locking up any cell door in case of attack) is probably that most officers' experiences indicate that the rules are redundant, except from the few but serious cases where it is not, which is very difficult to predict. The officers did, however, distinguish some exceptional, unpredictable prisoners where such rules were reasonable. These rule regimes were temporary arrangements, based on particularly threatening or aggressive prisoners, resulting in particularly uncertain environments. Grote & Weichbrodt (2007, p. 2) emphasize exactly the number and nature of uncertainties in the environment is an important factor in determining the right balance between standardisation and flexibility, and the uncertainty associated with prisoners under such regimes point to the need for flexibility. However, the prison controlled this uncertainty by removing most of the interactional aspects usually central in prison work by isolating such prisoners in cells away from the usual social environment and by adding strict safety rules for the little interaction left. This minimised the uncertainties of human interaction and human judgement. The same was seen in the extraordinary imprisonment of a Norwegian terrorist, where a number of very strict safety action rules were combined with rules reducing officers' conversation with the prisoner (Sørensen & Kruke, 2020).

At the same time as representing great uncertainty, these prisoners were consequently placed in a very controlled environment. The tendency of rule compliance in these situations therefore still supports the assumption in Grote and Weichbrodt (2007) that standardisation will work better in situations with few uncertainties. The regime's situations were controllable in a totally different way than uncertain dynamic situations like an ongoing effort to apprehend a prisoner (as discussed

above), and the decisions of complying with these rules were seldom made in interaction with prisoners. In some prison situations, therefore, it is *possible* to comply almost blindly with action rules.

Conversely, Grote and Weichbrodt (2007) suggest that local autonomy and control are needed when uncertainties are high. In the case of rule regimes in this study, similar to the prison study by Sørensen and Kruke (2020) that found very high rule compliance, the rule regimes were local, put into effect by a manager close to the officers carrying out the rules. Field managers have been argued by Ughetto (2018) as being important for rule compliance. The local anchoring of the regimes could explain the accordance between rules and officers' risk awareness, which is understood as an unpredictable situation difficult to navigate through social dynamics. Previous findings within other contexts of safety work concur with these findings on the importance of risk awareness. Seafarers, for instance, highlight exactly the kind of procedures that regulate rare situations and high-risk work as convenient and useful (Antonsen, 2009; Bye & Aalberg, 2020; Knudsen, 2009). These situations seem to represent what Hale and Borys (2013b) mention as "the ultimate aim" for rule management: rules that are seen as sensible to such an extent that the practitioners use social control to maintain compliance within the officer group.

The sense of these temporary rule arrangements being based on specific risk brings us back to the *lack* of sense associated with the more general rules based on worst-case scenarios. Deviations from rules based on officers' own judgements concur with the results from, for instance, the studies referenced above on seafarers. In seafaring, however, this is explained by the seamanship concept. In prison, I suggest this could be explained by the social sensitivity officers seemed to develop through experience from social interactions with prisoners.

Another explanation of deviations from unnecessary rules is related to the negotiating practices identified in Section 4.2, which also showed a tendency towards *avoidance* to enact the rules. Avoidance is not the same thing as judging rules as unnecessary, but I suggest that some of the explanations of both kinds of deviations could be traced to the fragile social order in prisons (Sparks et al., 1996). While, in principle, there can never be too much safety working with a nuclear reactor, in prison, safety interventions can in themselves constitute a risk by interfering with the tense interactional dynamics between staff and prisoners. When enacting rules intervening with prisoners' actions, officers exert power, which could be provocative. When enacting rules meant to ensure the officers' safety against prisoners (for instance, moving outside the yard fence when being the only officer present), this would symbolise the labelling of prisoners as dangerous (cf. Becker, 1997). Both meanings affect the social interaction between officers and prisoners. This clearly shows the symbolic interacting quality of the work, where the officers adjust their actions to how they interpret prisoners and how they assume prisoners will interpret them. Because of the officers' awareness of risk related to this social interaction, I suggest that the downscaling of "unnecessary" rules could be seen as safety acts. This meaning of rule deviation is probably unique for this kind of social context, where the focus on "clients" represents new aspects in safety work.

This focus not only highlights the security aspects of rule enactment in prison but also how social dynamics are important for unintentional risk. The interpretations officers base their enactment of rules on seems likely to influence, for instance, whether they decide to use protective equipment. Moreover, the subtle negotiations with prisoners, based on strenuous interaction, seemed to be especially detrimental for rules regulating control interventions. This aspect of rule implementation has received little attention, but, according to the informants' own accounts of the need for training in this study, Hale and Borys (2013b) suggest training "to implant rules in the heads of users" at the sharp end of safety work. For safety work involving demanding human interaction as part of the work, however, it seems that training needs to be aimed at general confidence in rule enactment, based on acknowledging the social strain involved.

Some differences between officers in how they relate to rules are identified. Workplace socialization could probably be part of the explanation for the recurrence of some deviations, as a consequence of seeing other officers deviating from rules in routine situations, as well as little enforcement of the rules by the management. Other differences seemed to stem from different framings of risk and control among individual officers, creating different views on which considerations should be emphasized most in order to achieve a state of safety. The importance of framing of risk and safety agrees with previous research on occupations responsible for the safety of others and themselves (e.g. Sanne 2008 on railway technicians; Maslen & Ransan-Cooper 20,016 on the pipeline industry).

The study points out some vulnerabilities of the interactional impact on rule enactment for safety. There are important pitfalls associated with judgements about what is suitable and "necessary" in dynamic environments, as this study indicates. This means there is a duality with working in a dynamic environment, where sometimes it is necessary to adjust to reality, while at other times this could be fatal. This supports a diverse view of standardisation and flexibility, as argued in Grote and Weichbrodt (2007). Much safety research emphasising rule adaption as important for safety is, however, from high-reliability organisations, traditionally characterised by a much more stable environment than is usually the case in prisons. Because of the highly dynamic social environment in prisons, judgements based on intuition can be unreliable sources of information. It is an "obvious fact that professional intuition is sometimes marvellous and sometimes flawed" (Kahneman & Klein, 2009, p. 515), and it should be questioned both whether "gut feeling" based on human interaction in fact is a useful concept[3], and to what *extent* safety rules should be adapted from social interaction. Both questions are especially apparent regarding security rules created as barriers to prisoners' ability to strategically plan and "outsmart" the rules. The ability to outsmart security barriers and take advantage of vulnerabilities in human judgement are risks that in particular should be taken seriously in operative security work.

From a diverse view of standardisation and flexibility, I would argue for the general importance of understanding and predicting social interaction when standardizing risk assessments through rules.

When it comes to "safety" as a concept including both intentional and unintentional risks, as initially argued for, I believe the study results support this, referring to the usefulness of theory developed from safety settings in analysing and discussing the findings, as well as the accordance between these results and empirical findings from previous safety studies: Dynamic environments complicate and overvalue rule compliance, experienced workers rely on their own judgement at the expense of rules, and some situational characteristics result in even experienced workers supporting rules. It would be inaccurate to ignore the body of knowledge on safety rules that provides insight into these matters because the work studied also included intentional risk. Theory on social interaction would also be relevant for other safety studies, both for safety aspects in security work and for interactions within and between different groups working with unintentional risk.

However, some important aspects differentiate the findings of this study. A main argument in this paper is that people as the source of risk, and the close interaction with these people, changes the system previously known from literature on safety rules. Risk and uncertainty in prison are to a large extent connected to people's actions and the interaction between them, which is a new focus within safety science

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[3] It should be pointed out that this was something most of the officers were well aware of.

due to the obvious fact that an atomic nucleus or a ship does not interpret your actions and adjust to it[4]. This special characteristic of the prison system will in many situations results in a dynamic environment indicating a need for flexibility, similar to previous literature from hazardous environments. However, the prison system can also, to some extent and in some situations, form a safety system to reduce the social dynamics creating uncertainty. The possibility of implementing uncertainty-reducing measures in special cases indicates that standardisation could be useful in situations where social interaction with prisoners represents particularly large uncertainty or risk.

The impact of social interaction on the enactment of safety rules could also be relevant outside the prison context for other kinds of work regulated by rules and dealing with human risk in interaction with some kind of clients, such as psychiatric nurses, police officers and security guards. More research is needed to investigate how these frontline workers in long-lasting interactional safety work deals with carrying out safety rules at the same time as managing to balance fragile social orders in various occupational environments.

5.1. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. All data were collected from one prison, which provides limited insights into safety work in prisons in general. However, the prison officer group was large, with a variety of wings, and was compounded by officers with experiences from several prisons. The officers' accounts give reason to assume there is great variety in how safety rules are managed and carried out in different high-security prisons, which would be interesting to explore further.

Moreover, being a participant observer involves influencing the situations observed (Becker, 1996). This could especially be a limitation when studying "failure" and misconduct, as many informants probably see breaking the rules. However, while sharing the work background with the informants involved challenges (as outlined in Section 3.1), it was probably a strength to be seen (partly) as an "insider" in this respect. However, being a participant observer will always involve influencing the setting with one's presence, a potential limitation that should be acknowledged.

The special characteristics of the Norwegian prison service are also worth noting, meaning the results will not necessarily be relevant for all prison contexts internationally. As suggested above, perhaps it would be more interesting to look for the characteristics of frontline safety work with face-to-face interactions with people as the source of risk to find comparable contexts.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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[4] This could, however, not always be labelled under "security" referring to intentional, or even malicious risks, due to the complex reality of human actions and intentionality. Prisoners with serious mental health problems, for instance, could harm others without intent and certainly without "malicious" intent. This indicates that the difference between safety and security is not as straightforward as it may seem.

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