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Double Liminality: Transitional Imprisonment and the Ambiguities of the Open Prison

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Abstract

This analysis reconceptualises open prisons as institutions of suspension rather than bridges to freedom. Extending penal liminality theory, it advances the concept of double liminality to explain how ‘transitional imprisonment’ — custody whose boundary remains permeable in both directions — governs through compounded ambiguity. Drawing on qualitative research in English open prisons, the study theorises how prisoners are suspended between two thresholds: regression to closed prison conditions and conditional release. Over-institutionalised in sanction yet under-institutionalised in support, open prisons generate three dimensions of suspended experience: institutional ambiguity, fractured identity, and temporal suspension, operating as a governance technique. By framing open custody within the logics of neoliberal conditionality and responsabilisation, the study offers a framework for analysing institutional doubleness, where the demand for autonomy coincides with its denial. It contributes to emerging debates on penal transformation, temporal power, and carceral governance through withdrawal.

Keywords:

Double liminality, open prisons, transitional imprisonment, responsabilisation, institutional withdrawal, temporal suspension, carceral identity, neoliberal conditionality

Introduction

Open prisons occupy a unique position within the penal landscape. Situated between the thresholds of closed custody and community release, they are intended as the final institutional stage before reintegration. In England and Wales, they are Category D establishments (the lowest security classification), housing approximately 5,000 men across 13 establishments. They have minimal perimeter security and offer Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), encompassing day release, overnight stays, and home leave intended to ease reintegration. Men typically transfer from closed custody during the final 30 months of their sentences to test their capacity for self-regulation before release. Open prisons are presented as a rational stage in progressive penal trajectories, celebrated as ‘bridges’ through which prisoners practise autonomy under supervision, cultivate responsibility, and demonstrate readiness for liberty (Schreeche-Powell, 2025; Mjåland et al., 2023).

However, the reality of open custody often contradicts this linear imagery. Many prisoners find it less transitional and more like a holding zone: a place of profound ambiguity where autonomy is always provisional, freedom always conditional, and progress always reversible (Schreeche-Powell, 2025, 2026a; Marder et al., 2021; Shammas, 2014). Those who are imprisoned can be returned rapidly to closed prisons (‘regression’ or ‘down-categorisation’) due to licence breaches (breach of the conditions attached to temporary release or to the sentence licence), perceived increases in risk, or failure to meet regime demands. While upward progression requires formal board reviews, regression can be enacted swiftly by governors based on assessment rather than proven infractions. This creates a structural paradox: those imprisoned remain formally incarcerated and subject to the disciplinary structures of imprisonment, yet must adopt the roles of responsible workers, parents, and provisional citizens (Clarke et al., 2005; Waite, 2024).

Transition has long been theorised through the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’ (Turner, 1967, 1969; van Gennep, [1909] 1960), which refers to the ‘betwixt and between’ stage in rites of passage: a temporary suspension of ordinary roles oriented towards transformation and reintegration. Criminological scholarship has applied this concept to imprisonment, viewing entry shock as identity rupture (Goffman, 1961; Jewkes, 2005; Sykes, 1958) and release as a threshold of unsettled belonging (Schinkel, 2014). However, despite its wide use, liminality has been criticised for conceptual drift. Finn (2021) warns it risks becoming a catch-all term

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for any uncertainty, diluting its analytical force. To remain useful, liminality must be anchored to clearly defined thresholds, institutional mechanisms, and lived practices. In this article, liminality is applied in a strictly analytical sense to denote institutionally produced suspension between clearly specified thresholds rather than as a general descriptor of uncertainty or transition.

In open custody, suspension is not anchored to a single passage but to two thresholds operating simultaneously. This analysis advances the concept of double liminality to capture this distinctive condition. Prisoners are caught between the backward pull of possible regression to closed custody and the forward anticipation of conditional release; a form that is neither merely elongated liminality nor smooth transition, but compounded ambiguity. While these thresholds are built into the institutional design of the open estate, their effects are intensified by ‘institutional withdrawal’, which retracts guidance and support while leaving evaluative and disciplinary power intact (Schreeche-Powell, 2026a). The result is a form of ‘transitional imprisonment’ that positions open prisons not as bridges to freedom but as institutions of suspension.

Theorising Liminality in Late-Modern Imprisonment

Originating in van Gennep’s ([1909] 1960) concept of rites of passage, liminality describes the intermediate stage between separation and incorporation: a suspension marked by ambiguity and transformation. Turner (1969) emphasised how liminal states suspend normal structures, rendering individuals vulnerable. Theorists have extended liminality beyond rituals to modern institutional life, identifying permanent or prolonged suspension (Szakolczai, 2017).

Criminology has increasingly applied the concept of liminality to analyse the thresholds of imprisonment. Prison entry has been read as a liminal rite of passage, where the stripping of civilian identity and imposition of institutional routines produce disorientation (Goffman, 1961). Release has also been approached as a threshold of unsettled belonging and fragile reintegration (Schinkel, 2014). Beyond these temporal thresholds, Moran (2013) shows how carceral boundaries become porous producing liminal zones and contests the assumption that such zones entail linear passage. Armstrong and Weaver (2013), though not framed in liminal terms, illustrate punishment as straddling both custody and community. Although these accounts are valuable, they generally focus on a single threshold: the boundary between inside

and outside, whether crossed once or repeatedly. Less attention has been given to how liminality is embedded within imprisonment across multiple thresholds operating simultaneously, particularly in open prison estates.

Research has highlighted the ambiguities of open prisons, suggesting that prisoners find them particularly difficult to navigate, albeit in different ways across jurisdictions. Shammas (2014) identifies the 'pains of freedom' in open conditions: the paradox whereby increased autonomy in open conditions produces anxiety rather than relief, as prisoners find self-governance destabilising after years of institutional routine, while Statham et al. (2021) and Waite (2024) document hypervigilance, identity disruption, and the destabilising effects of conditional liberty in English open prisons. Mjåland et al. (2023) show that in open conditions in Norway, prisoners report continuing to experience separation from family and social life, loss of contact with the outside world, boredom, guilt, perceived unfairness and a sense that their lives are being wasted. Nyvoll (2025, 2026), by contrast, shows how conditional freedoms can function as stabilising signals of institutional confidence where these conditions are sustained, supported by relational staff presence, procedural clarity, and trust. Taken together, this comparative literature suggests that while the two thresholds underpinning double liminality are structural features of open custody, the uncertainty and immobilisation associated with them depend on how those thresholds are organised and managed. Ambiguity and ambivalence are therefore not peripheral features of open custody but recurring patterns across jurisdictions. Rather than resolving penal uncertainty, openness co-exists with anxiety around progression, identity, and conditional freedom. How destabilising this becomes varies with institutional arrangements, access to staff support, relational trust, and the exercise of evaluative authority, but the uncertainty itself recurs across open-prison settings. Open custody exemplifies this structural pattern in a distinctive way: its liminality is not merely prolonged but compounded. In contrast to guided transitions (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), the open prison estate is often described as offering limited scaffolding and accentuating uncertainty (Schreeche-Powell, 2026b). Open custody, then, is emphatically liminal: participation is compulsory, scripts opaque, and the possibility of reversal ever-present.

Double Liminality, and the cognate notion of dual liminality, has also appeared sporadically in anthropological scholarship (Mascia-Lees et al., 1987), postcolonial literary criticism to describe compounded marginality (Iqbal and Mustafa, 2022), health research to describe young people navigating illness and developmental transition concurrently (Marshall et al., 2019) and

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in criminology to capture families’ dual experiences of penal and political uncertainty (Annison and Condry, 2022) or young people navigating adolescence and familial imprisonment (Deacon, 2023). While these applications locate doubleness in biographical circumstance or in parallel or compounding conditions, this article conceptualises double liminality as an institutional structure rather than a biographical condition: individuals are suspended between two thresholds simultaneously, each pulling in opposite directions, in a configuration that functions as a governance technique rather than a transitional stage.

Understanding why open custody produces this compounded ambiguity requires engaging with how penal power operates within imprisonment more broadly. Crewe's (2009, 2011) account of depth, weight, and tightness shows how imprisonment exerts psychological pressure through incentives and norm internalisation, with soft power operating through responsabilisation rather than overt force. Crewe and Ievins (2021) develop this framework to show that prisons can be simultaneously tight and loose, demanding in their evaluative expectations while deficient in their supportive functions. In such conditions, looseness is not experienced as freedom but as a painful form of institutional inattention: prisoners are held accountable for meeting demands while being denied the means to do so. Open prisons might be expected to represent looseness in a more straightforward sense given that gates are open, movement is less restricted, and self-management is actively encouraged. In turn, Crewe et al. (2014) theorise imprisonment's authority along an 'absent-present' axis, where varied staff presence and engagement creates uncertainty and leaves prisoners less able to self-regulate.

I proposed the concept of ‘institutional withdrawal’ (Schreeche-Powell, 2026a) to identify a mechanism distinct from both looseness and the absent-present axis. It is not simply deficiency in institutional grip — the reach, hold and attention over prisoners — within a system that still intends to support, nor simply the staff absence or weak engagement captured by Crewe et al.’s (2014) absent-present axis. Rather, institutional withdrawal involves a structural separation of functions: supportive, guiding, and enabling capacities are retracted while evaluative and disciplinary ones persist. Where looseness describes a failure of grip and absence describes the under-use of authority as such, withdrawal produces uncertainty about whether guidance will ever arrive at all. This distinction matters because it shifts the analysis from institutional deficiency to institutional design: open custody does not merely fail to support prisoners; whether by design or through accumulated constraint, it is organised in a way that systematically separates evaluation from enablement. Analyses by Liebling and Arnold (2004)

and Liebling (2011) complement this by emphasising the moral dimensions of authority, showing how legitimacy and trust are central to prisoners' experience of penal power. Where trust is absent and guidance withdrawn, the moral basis of institutional authority is undermined, intensifying rather than resolving the anxieties of transitional imprisonment. These accounts of penal power illuminate the structural conditions within which open prison anxiety is produced.

Shammas' (2014) account of the pains of freedom is developed further here, but the argument advanced is distinct in an important respect. For Shammas, the anxiety of open custody is located primarily in the experience of freedom itself: autonomy is destabilising because prisoners are required to exercise greater self-governance following prolonged exposure to institutional regulation. The present analysis brings the institutional structure to the foreground, to consider how anxiety is actively produced through the design of open custody, specifically through the simultaneous operation of two competing thresholds and the withdrawal of support that would otherwise make those thresholds navigable. Where Shammas shows that expanded freedom can itself become a source of anxiety and frustration, the present analysis considers how that anxiety is produced by a structure that extends freedom with one hand while threatening its revocation with the other, simultaneously retracting the institutional infrastructure that would make it manageable. This represents a shift of analytical emphasis: from the experience of penal freedom to the institutional mechanics that produce and sustain anxiety as a governance technique.

If accounts of penal power explain how authority is exercised within open custody, they leave open the question of how its burdens are distributed. Responsibilisation, a defining feature of late-modern punishment (Garland, 2001; Hannah-Moffat, 2001), addresses precisely this: it displaces the burden of transformation from institutions to individuals, rendering progress an obligation and failure a personal fault. Open prisons represent a particularly salient site for examining these dynamics, where the tension between autonomy and control may be intensified (Shammas, 2014). Prisoners are increasingly required to demonstrate responsibility, manage their own progress, and embody readiness for release. This creates contradictory subject positions: individuals must act as responsible citizens while still subject to surveillance and sanction (Bosworth, 1999, 2007; Ugelvik, 2014). As Rose (1999) and Hannah-Moffat (2001) argue, responsibilisation demands autonomous self-governance and institutional compliance, and this coupling structures its operation. Responsibilisation identifies the transfer of responsibility to the governed subject; the present analysis instead examines what occurs

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when the institutional infrastructure needed to navigate that responsibility is partially withdrawn. Organisational research suggests that liminality can support exploratory ‘identity play’ when provisional roles are scaffolded and reversible (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Whether open prisons provide such scaffolding, and whether the threat of regression inhibits experimentation, the empirical analysis below addresses directly.

The frameworks of liminality, responsibilisation, soft power, and institutional withdrawal together illuminate how open custody produces compounded suspension and how that suspension is governed. The empirical analysis proceeds in two stages: it first examines how institutional ambiguity is produced through the two thresholds and institutional withdrawal before considering the consequences for identity and temporality, and how that suspension is governed. Before this analysis, I detail the research context and methods used in the section below.

Research Context

This article is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2024 with men who had served in three open prisons located in England, and with officers who had worked in them. The original project explored peer-led induction (PLI), which is a structured programme in which selected prisoners assist with welcoming and orienting new arrivals, covering areas such as offender management, resettlement, and substance-use support. It specifically studied its role in shaping men’s mental health and well-being during the transitional period of transfer into open conditions (Schreeche-Powell, 2025). For the current analysis, I returned to the dataset, adopting a thematic approach to examine more broadly how men described the uncertainties of open imprisonment, focusing on the conceptual frames of liminality, penal power, and responsibilisation.

The research involved 34 participants: 27 men with direct experience of serving in the open prison estate and engaging with PLI, and seven prison officers who oversaw induction practices. The prisoner participants ranged in age from their twenties to sixties with varied ethnic and custodial backgrounds (16 White, 9 Black, and 2 Asian). Some had lengthy experience of moving between different prisons, while others were encountering the open prison estate for the first time. The officer sample included five men and two women, ranging in experience from early career roles to over a decade’s service in the prison. Semi-structured

interviews allowed participants to narrate their own experiences of transfer, induction, and everyday life in open prisons, and interview guides were iteratively adjusted as themes emerged during the fieldwork. The analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), with coding guided by the systematic procedures set out by Miles and Huberman (1994). While the initial study developed a grounded theory of PLI and its unintended consequences, the re-analysis presented here foregrounds the ambiguities of open custody itself.

The interviews sought retrospective accounts rather than capturing participants' experiences during induction. This temporal distance provided several advantages. Instead of being confined to first encounters, these retrospective narratives offered a broader perspective on open custody. Participants were able to make sense of their induction in the context of later developments, such as day release, home leave, and progression decisions, and to situate their experiences within the wider trajectory of open conditions. Claims about staff availability are grounded in cross-participant accounts and officer descriptions of staffing and deployment patterns, rather than systematic observational counts. Although these reflections were not all included in the earlier analysis that focused narrowly on induction, they are drawn upon here because they highlight how open prisons are experienced as doubled thresholds over time.

The thematic focus of this article is on how men's accounts reveal overlapping dimensions of institutional ambiguity, fractured identity, and temporal suspension. The sample spans three English open prisons with diverse custodial histories; the consistency in accounts across sites suggests organisational patterns rather than site-specific variation. Nonetheless, since the findings are jurisdiction specific and drawn from retrospective accounts, they are offered as theoretical rather than representative generalisations. The research was conducted with careful attention to ethical responsibilities, given the vulnerability of the participants and the wider history of extractive prison research (see Charles et al., 2016). In doing so, the study followed Diener and Crandall's (1978) four principles of avoiding harm, securing informed consent, protecting privacy, and avoiding deception. Potential power asymmetries within the interview encounter were approached through the reflexive framework set out by Dickson-Swift et al. (2007), and as such enacted through measured self-disclosure, attention to rapport, reciprocity

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in dialogue, and openness about the study's purposes and procedures. Approval was secured through the host university's ethics committee.¹

Between Two Thresholds of Regression and Release

Open custody is structured by two thresholds: the backward threshold of regression to closed conditions, and the forward threshold of conditional release. This analysis draws on participants' accounts of induction, daily conduct, and anticipated release to trace three dimensions of experience that these thresholds jointly produce: institutional ambiguity, fractured identity, and temporal suspension. The two thresholds are features of institutional design; the three dimensions are what living between them produces. The analysis is presented in two parts. The first examines institutional ambiguity and the governance of conditional autonomy under the shadow of regression. The second addresses fractured identity and temporal suspension together because participants' accounts consistently presented these as inseparable, with responsibility and future-oriented selfhood demanded in a present shaped by lingering custodial habits and uncertain prospects of release.

Institutional Ambiguity

Participants described the open estate as superficially permissive but inherently precarious, with everyday conduct saturated by the perceived possibility of regression to closed conditions. Peter² captured the disproportionate sense of risk communicated at induction, describing how missteps in navigating the early days in the open prison and completing the induction programme were framed as having direct consequences for progression: 'If you struggle with doing that [following the induction paperwork and appointments] or miss anything ... induction gets delayed ... you'll be held back moving off the induction and your progress will too.'

This conditioning made autonomy feel provisional and precarious. Progress was narrated as being close yet always reversible. Peter located this in the very geography of the estate, with proximity to family life overshadowed by a visible reminder of potential return to closed conditions:

¹ This study received ethical approval from the University of Kent Institutional Review Board (approval 16012020ESP) on 16 January 2020.
² Pseudonyms have been used for participants throughout.

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3 I was so close, close to spending time at home with my family and getting back to
4 normality ... it was pressuring though cos I could see the high-security prison across
5 the road, and I knew I could end up back there anytime.
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9 Harvey's account captured the pervasive self-monitoring this produced:
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11 I didn't wanna get anything wrong in case it stopped me getting my home leaves on
12 time. I was constantly feeling like I was treading on eggshells, so I made the move to
13 stay out of the way in my cell.
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17 The metaphor of 'treading on eggshells' recurred across the interviews, echoing its use in
18 accounts of penal experience (Crewe, 2011; Statham et al., 2021), and reflected a pervasive
19 sense that any misstep, trivial or serious, could shatter the provisional status of open custody.
20 These accounts share a common structure: autonomy is extended, regression looms, and
21 conduct is shaped by the perceived possibility of reversal. Notably, among the 27 participants
22 with direct experience of serving in the open prison estate, none reported personally
23 experiencing regression during their time in open custody, although many described witnessing
24 or hearing about regressions involving peers. Officers, however, associated regression
25 primarily with more substantive risk and security concerns, including failed drug tests, changes
26 in perceived absconding risk, and adverse risk assessments. As Officer Kev explained:
27 '[they're] the common ones we see'. The same officer also suggested that institutional attention
28 in general was selective, describing having to 'make tough calls about what to prioritise'. What
29 matters analytically, therefore, is not the frequency of regression but its perceived availability
30 (cf. Waite, 2024).
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42 This perception structured everyday conduct and self-regulation. This finding contrasts with
43 recent accounts of open imprisonment, such as Pakes' (2023) study of Icelandic open prisons,
44 which characterises openness as operating at the 'shallow end' of imprisonment, where trust,
45 stability, and reduced surveillance underpin the regime. In contrast, the experiences described
46 here suggest a different configuration where openness is structured around reversibility:
47 autonomy is extended but remains persistently exposed to withdrawal. What appears
48 permissive on the surface is experienced as precarious in practice, precisely because regression
49 remains perceived as readily possible. This dynamic extends beyond looseness in Crewe and
50 Ievins' sense (2021). While their account identifies the coexistence of demanding evaluation
51 and deficient support, the present analysis conceptualises this dynamic as institutional
52 withdrawal: a structural separation of evaluative from enabling functions, embedded within the
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organisation of open custody rather than arising solely from inconsistency or resource deficiency.

A pattern of institutional withdrawal (guidance retracted, evaluation retained) was not confined to individual encounters but characterised the organisational structure of induction across all three establishments. Participants described the same practical problem: when they needed guidance, staff were hard to access — they were ‘in the office,’ ‘too busy,’ or ‘nowhere to be found.’ As Jimmy stated, ‘...No time. They sit on their arse drinking coffee in the office.’ This widespread perception was described by 21 of 27 prisoner participants and echoed by officers, who described heavily relying on peer mentors — prisoners appointed to induction and orientation roles to support other prisoners — for day-to-day prisoner contact. Despite variations between prisons — one establishment maintained more structured Offender Management Unit (OMU) contact hours, while another had more engaged residential staff during specific shifts — the fundamental dynamic persisted: formal guidance was difficult to access, while the prisoners remained subject to ongoing evaluative scrutiny.

Institutional withdrawal manifested across multiple registers beyond the disengagement of peer mentors. At the procedural level, the Offender Management Unit that was responsible for sentence planning, risk assessment, and progression exemplified this phenomenon. Prisoners had to identify correct forms, complete them properly, submit them through unclear routes, and wait for replies with little sense of timescale or outcome. As James described: ‘OMU don't come to you ... it's your responsibility to contact them and find out what you need to do and submit the forms, otherwise your progression and going out will be delayed.’ The burden fell entirely on prisoners to decode an opaque system while under continuing assessment — not a preparation for autonomy but an abandonment into it.

This withdrawal was reinforced organisationally where officers were moved away from routine prisoner contact, concentrating more in administrative functions rather than residential support roles. Even where staff were physically present, participants described interactions as evaluative rather than supportive whereby officers observed ‘engagement’ and ‘attitude’ against undefined criteria rather than offering orientation or guidance. Withdrawal therefore operated as a consistent structural condition across institutional registers.

For Rich, attempts to seek help heightened, rather than eased, pressure:

I was lost. I didn't have much idea about what was going on, and I didn't feel I had the stuff I needed to figure it out ... What I got was not what I needed and didn't answer

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3 the questions I had ... questions went unanswered and led to more questions and this
4 just got me worked up and ramped my anxiety up ... It was testing.
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7 When clarity did emerge, it was often provided through informal peer scaffolding rather than
8 through officers or induction staff. Rich put it plainly: 'Luckily, I knew a few fellas from my
9 last prison, and they showed me the ropes and what I needed to do ... no one else did.'
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13 Perry described being overwhelmed by information without support to process it: 'There was
14 a lot of information ... too much to take in at times ... I couldn't keep up.' Peter echoed this
15 experience of floundering without scaffolding: 'I was trying to work out what I needed to
16 prioritise when listening, but I couldn't so [I] ended up getting proper worked up and flustered.'
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19 Del's fuller account captures how this operated simultaneously across peer and staff levels:
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23 There needed to be much more support ... it was like we were invisible and so were
24 they [mentors] ... I was struggling and I felt isolated and on me own ... they just weren't
25 approachable or that interested.
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29 Joey observed this pattern further amongst the peer mentors:
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32 'They were only interested in fucking me off out the door so they could get on with cooking
33 their dinner and association [...] questions just went unanswered — they were invisible.' James
34 echoed this:
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37 'every time I asked a question they just fobbed me off and told [me] I'd figure it out as
38 I went along...'
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41 Rich described this transactional dynamic as follows: once administrative requirements were
42 satisfied, peer mentors rapidly disengaged, becoming unavailable for follow-up questions or
43 ongoing support. Ally had the same experience, describing how he was exhausted by the
44 accumulation of unanswered questions: 'It just made me more worried ... I had a head full of
45 questions I couldn't answer or get answered ... I just wanted to say fuck it and do nothing.'
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47 Rob's assessment of staff was damning: 'By far a bunch [the prison officers] of selfish, lazy
48 cunts ... doing the minimum.'
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52 Compliance was assessed through persistent yet opaque evaluation rather than scheduled
53 reviews or transparent criteria. Attendance at induction modules was tracked through sign-off
54 sheets prisoners had to complete; staff observed 'engagement' and 'attitude' but with undefined
55 criteria; and risk assessments and categorisation reviews incorporated these informal
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3 observations alongside formal metrics (such as adjudications, drug tests, and the successful
4 completion of periods of Release on Temporary Licence), though the weighting given to each
5 element remained unclear. Compliance standards appeared to be established retroactively: men
6 discovered they had failed to meet expectations only when progression was denied or
7 regression threatened. Rich's account of staff being 'on top of you all the time ... just waiting
8 to fuck you over' captures the structural paradox: assessment was experienced as ongoing while
9 guidance was not.

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11 The content of those expectations was equally unspecified. Participants described fearing
12 regression across a spectrum of situations, from clearly serious matters such as failed drug tests
13 or aggressive incidents to more ambiguous circumstances whose consequences were unclear
14 to them in advance. Being 'late' raised immediate questions without clear answers— would
15 missing your ROTL return time due to a delayed bus outside your control be interpreted as
16 presenting an absconding risk? Would missing an internal roll call due to confusion about
17 timing be defined as a regression-level offence? Harvey described a prohibition of this kind: 'I
18 got told not to do this and that [...] silly things like stepping on the grass in a certain area would
19 mean I get sent back to closed conditions [...] the peer mentor told me that.' Similarly,
20 associating with the 'wrong' prisoners could trigger regression, though who counted as 'wrong'
21 remained unspecified. Although graduated disciplinary measures existed in principle, such as
22 warnings, adjudications, and loss of privilege, participants perceived regression as the most
23 consequential available sanction. This was an administrative decision enacted swiftly by
24 governors without the procedural protections of formal discipline. As James put it, 'You have
25 to do it one way or the other': yet the right way was rarely specified in advance but always
26 judged in retrospect.

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28 While many prisoners do secure ROTL and eventual release, day release earned can be
29 immediately revoked and home leave can trigger fresh anxieties about return. The dual
30 suspension lies not in the impossibility of movement but in its perpetual precariousness. As
31 Karl put it:

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33 They tell you this is the last step, but it doesn't feel like moving forward. It feels like
34 waiting to see if they'll actually let you out — or maybe send you back if something
35 ain't right. The future's on hold.

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37 The result is a lived governance of ambiguous permission, where freedoms are offered but feel
38 contingent, rules are present but unevenly signalled, and support is possible but largely peer

mediated. This ambivalence resembles Shammass' (2014) 'pains of freedom'. But, as set out above, the present analysis locates that anxiety in institutional design rather than only in the experience of freedom itself: regression remains structurally possible, guidance is withdrawn, and authority reappears primarily through sanction. The resulting governance dynamic echoes the logic of neoliberal conditionality (Wacquant, 2009; Garland, 2001), in which freedoms are extended as contingent rewards rather than entitlements, with their retention dependent on ongoing self-regulation despite the absence of reliable institutional support. James's account illustrates this: it was 'your responsibility to contact them' at the Offender Management Unit, while progression depended on doing so correctly. Under this logic, the consequences of unsuccessful navigation remain attached to the individual, rather than a structural outcome of institutional design.

This configuration is not inevitable; institutional design elsewhere, including Norway, can buffer the ambiguity that double liminality produces (Nyvoll, 2026). In my English case study, however, open custody emerges as fragile suspension, where apparent freedoms depend on vigilant compliance rather than trust-based stability.

Fractured Identity and Temporal Suspension: Between Prisoner and Citizen-in-Waiting

The second and third dimensions of double liminality, fractured identity and temporal suspension, concern identity as it is lived across time. Men were required to perform readiness for release even as their prisoner status was continually reasserted, and this performance unfolded within a temporal structure that kept them suspended between a carceral past that persisted and a conditional future that remained withheld. The result of this structural difficulty was a fractured identity, with no coherent way of inhabiting either prisoner or citizen roles. Anxiety, overwhelm, and fear were the affective forms through which this condition was lived.

The difficulty of integrating prisoner and citizen identities was evident in how the men described their experiences of open custody. The backward threshold of closed custody remained embedded in daily life, producing a compulsive return to carceral habits even as they were expected to perform citizenship. As Steve reflected:

Years of doing things one way, then bang it was turned on its head. Things were so different, I kept making comparisons to my old nick, but they weren't the same ... just putting more pressure on myself I guess.

Sammy also described the behavioural persistence of closed-custody conditioning after transfer to open conditions:

I've been in high security for years where you get told what to do and when nothing happens without asking someone first and then you wait and fucking wait ... I've rocked up here and it's the other way, and it's hard to adjust ... but they can't see that — they think it must be easy to go from one extreme to the other, but the thing is ... year after year after year that was my life and routine — being here don't mean I'm gonna adjust overnight — it needs time and a little bit of help.

Here, the help Sammy described concerned practical guidance, information and support from staff and peer mentors in learning the unfamiliar routines and expectations of open custody.

The result went beyond contradictory subject positions — anticipated by Bosworth's (1999) account of penal agency and developed by Ugelvik (2014) — revealing a fractured identity in which men were pulled between deeply conflicting demands. Where Bosworth describes such a contradiction as being positioned as both autonomous and dependent, the accounts above reveal how this contradiction was experienced as fracturing: an inability to inhabit either the prisoner or citizen-in-waiting role coherently across time.

These habits reflect more than routine; they are defensive postures learned in the context of discipline and punishment, maintained out of anxiety about what might happen if they were abandoned. The men described these embodied repetitions as difficult to unlearn. Past custody haunted the present, saturating it with tension rather than stability, and shaping their conduct and behaviour. The 'citizen-in-waiting' must act differently from the prisoner, yet the prisoner's embodied knowledge persists, creating a tension within identity performance.

Family relationships intensified this. Mark expressed a dread in the wake of home leave: 'Seeing my kids on home leave, it's like a taste of freedom. But it's only ever borrowed time. You come back here and it feels worse, like you've been tricked.' Mark's account underlines the anxiety surrounding conditional autonomy. Consistent with Shammas' (2014) analysis, moments of proximity to freedom intensified rather than alleviated anxiety; here, however, this effect is amplified by the ever-present threat of regression, which renders future orientation

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3 precarious rather than anticipatory. The tension becomes visible: men perform the roles of
4 father and partner (citizen identities) during home leave, only to be immediately returned to
5 prisoner status. This alternation does not allow either identity to stabilise; instead, it fractures
6 both. The 'father' role cannot be sustained when visits are 'borrowed time,' and the 'prisoner'
7 role is made more painful by the knowledge of what has been temporarily accessed and then
8 withdrawn.
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11 The forward threshold of release, whether on temporary licence or final discharge, was equally
12 unstable and anxiety laden. As Darren explained: 'You don't know when or if you're moving
13 on sometimes, or maybe even going back, so you just don't make plans. You just get through
14 the day.'
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17 These reflections capture how release, imagined as a promise, was instead experienced as a
18 source of fear. The possibility of regression meant that men lived on the edge, their futures
19 always provisional. 'Citizen' identity requires future orientation — planning, hoping, investing
20 in relationships, and employment — yet this future remains withheld, denying the very
21 temporal horizon that would make citizenship coherent.
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24 This fractured identity was not just felt but actively produced through contradictory
25 institutional demands placed on new arrivals. Men were required to demonstrate autonomous
26 responsibility while being denied the conditions that would enable such autonomy. The
27 responsibilisation demands placed on new arrivals actively produced contradictory subject
28 positions that men found impossible to inhabit coherently. As Peter described induction: 'you
29 get a booklet with the timetable of induction modules ... it's on your head to follow it and go
30 where it says at the time it says.' On the surface this positioned him as an autonomous adult,
31 but the autonomy was brittle in ways extending beyond time management: the timetable
32 included appointments with departments that followed unwritten schedules, induction modules
33 that were sometimes cancelled without notice, and expectations about 'engagement' and
34 'willingness' that were never defined. The same ambiguous triggers documented earlier:
35 lateness, roll call, association, insufficient engagement, were here experienced not merely as
36 compliance risks but as tests of responsibility: actions were anticipated to either sustain
37 progression or jeopardise open status, even when formal disciplinary gradations existed.
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40 For others, this responsibilisation was experienced as neglect. Jimmy expressed his frustration
41 when both officers and peers withdrew support:
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Support and guidance cost nothing, but it seemed to be a big thing to them [staff and peer mentors], no interest in me ... couldn't even get the basics right ... kick a man when he is already down was what it was like.

Several participants perceived peer withdrawal as motivated by self-interest rather than incapacity. Peter observed: 'They think we are stupid ... none of 'em [peers] give a shit, not really, they're just looking out for themselves.' Joey concurred: 'We've all got an agenda ... theirs is just a bit more obvious than they'd like.' Whether accurate or not, this perspective reveals how withdrawal corroded trust. When help was withheld, men interpreted it as strategic rather than circumstantial, further isolating them during a period intended for integration. Steve recalled being told bluntly that he would need to 'start doing things for yourself' because staff would not be available once he began day release. Framed as preparation for freedom, the message was instead received as abandonment; he was being trained for independence by being left alone.

The psychological toll of this fractured position was profound, and the weight of arrival alone could be overwhelming. Joey captured this most directly:

I was scared shitless ... I was trying to front it out, so no one picked up on it, but just sitting in the reception I was totally on edge ... things were about to change and the consequences of not getting it were gonna mess things up for me and my family.

That fear did not dissipate with time. Steve admitted that beneath the veneer of progress, he felt unchanged:

I was struggling mate ... fuck me ... I thought I was past being scared but here I was the same guy who can't deal with his shit ... Sounds absolutely pathetic but it's how I felt [about trying to adjust].

What Steve described was not simply a fear of open conditions, but the collapse of a self-narrative built on having moved beyond that fear: the discovery that the prisoner identity persisted beneath the citizen performance.

Joey described how the sudden acceleration of expectations overwhelmed him: 'It made shit worse ... new nick, new people, new things ... it just made things go from 0 to 100mph in no time'. He described the emotional collapse that followed: 'My head was a mess ... I just wanted to go back ... I was up the creek without a paddle.' Joey's desire to return to the certainty of closed custody, a wish Steve also voiced, reveals how fractured identity can make regression

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3 feel like relief rather than failure: the backward threshold, while punitive in institutional logic,
4 at least offered the stability of a coherent role. David echoed this destabilisation, noting:

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7 ... anxiety went sky high ... I overthink at the best of times but new prison, new people,
8 new rules, new things to learn — it kind of takes over your thoughts. I was obsessing
9 over it, and it was stressing me out.
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13 Freddy captured this atmosphere of suspension most starkly: 'I didn't know what was coming
14 next ... just not knowing.' Here, suspension refers to the institutional-temporal condition of
15 being held between reversibility and release, while fear, disorientation, and anxiety are the
16 affective forms through which that condition was lived. These accounts show that men were
17 expected to perform responsibilities while reminders of their prisoner status loomed over every
18 action. This fractured identity was not experienced solely in the present moment but lived
19 across time: inseparable from the temporal structure in which it was performed. The men could
20 not successfully inhabit the role of 'citizen-in-waiting' when they remained anchored to carceral
21 pasts and denied access to secure futures.
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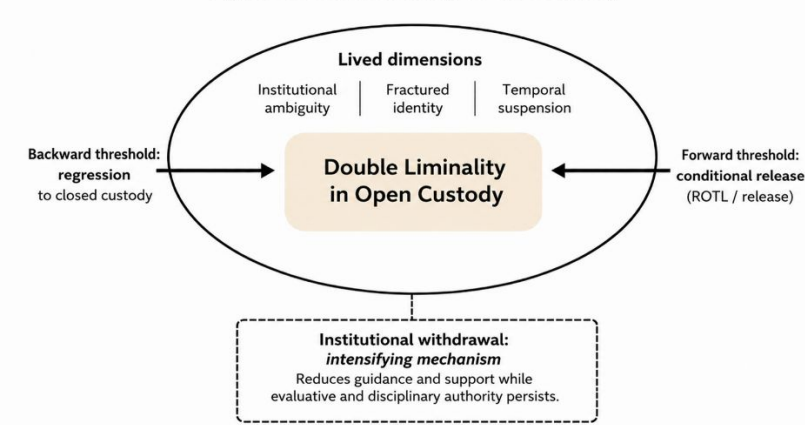
29 The result was identity work without identity play: men were compelled to rehearse the 'right'
30 self under continuous evaluation, without the security that allows those provisional roles to be
31 tested and gradually settled into (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Brief glimpses of freedom with
32 family intensified dread rather than easing it, fracturing the roles of father, partner, and citizen
33 into performances that could not be sustained.
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42 Double Liminality and the Open Estate: Theorising 43 Governance Through Suspension 44 45

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47 The open prison's doubled suspension extends existing criminological accounts of liminality,
48 responsibilisation, and penal power, demonstrating how liminality can be doubled, suspended,
49 and institutionally immobilising. Two thresholds, regression and release, structure open
50 custody; three dimensions of experience follow from them — institutional ambiguity, fractured
51 identity, and temporal suspension. The thresholds are features of institutional design; the
52 dimensions are what living between them produces. The three are analytically distinct but
53 empirically co-constitutive: they do not operate sequentially but reinforce one another across
54 the lived experience of open custody. Figure 1 summarises the institutional mechanism and
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lived dimensions through which this suspension is produced. As it indicates, the two thresholds do not act in sequence but bear on the prisoner simultaneously.

Figure 1. Double Liminality in Open Custody



Where recent studies have described open prisons as liminal or ambiguous spaces (e.g. Nyvoll, 2026), such usage often treats liminality as a descriptive condition rather than an institutional structure. The present analysis specifies how suspension is actively produced through competing thresholds and governance mechanisms. The findings align with Ibarra and Obodaru's (2016) concept of under-institutionalised liminality, where individuals must navigate transitions without adequate scripts, engaging in identity work — disciplined performances of the 'right' self — rather than identity play and exploratory role testing. For Ibarra and Obodaru, under-institutionalisation alone is not foreclosing as absent scripts and guiding figures make liminality harder to endure but also afford latitude for agentic self-crafting. What forecloses transformation in their framework is obligatory liminality, in which the passage cannot be declined and regression figures among the available outcomes. Open custody combines both, withholding the latitude while retaining the difficulty. Unlike voluntary, self-directed liminoid states that enable creative identity play (Turner, 1974; Lê and Lander, 2023), open prisons enforce an obligatory doubleness that immobilises rather than transforms. Carceral environments, as Jewkes and Laws (2021) observe, produce atmospheres of anticipation and anxiety; in the open estate, the double pull of regression and release pervades everyday life with affective instability.

Double liminality therefore arises from the simultaneous operation of regression and release thresholds, a feature of institutional design that would persist even under adequate support. Institutional withdrawal intensifies this condition, reducing guidance and support while retaining its evaluative and disciplinary functions, thereby producing a more precarious and immobilising mode of governance within transitional imprisonment.

Conclusion

The accounts presented in this article — with references to eggshells, borrowed time, questions that went unanswered, and the high-security prison visible across the road — reveal something that official discourse on open prisons consistently obscures: the experience of transitional custody is structured not by forward momentum but by compounded suspension. Open custody crystallises a condition of double liminality, in which the outcome is not passage but paralysis.

Classical liminality pointed towards transformation, but open custody produces suspension without incorporation. Men are caught in a regime of 'as-if freedom', where autonomy is simulated but remains precarious, help cannot be relied upon to arrive, and the future is experienced as anxiety rather than liberation. This diverges from Turner's (1969) notion of 'communitas', where liminality could foster solidarity among those sharing the liminal state. In the open estate, communitas was often fleeting, undermined by competition for placements, privileges, and assessments. The condition differs from Szokolczai's (2017) permanent liminality, where temporary liminal suspension extends indefinitely. Double liminality involves two thresholds operating simultaneously: men are pulled backwards and forwards at once. The concept resonates with recent work on double liminality (Annison and Condry, 2022) and dual liminars (Deacon, 2023) but differs in locating doubleness in institutional design rather than biographical circumstances or relational dynamics.

These findings refine existing accounts of penal power in open custody. Where Shammas (2014) locates the pains of freedom principally in the destabilising experience of autonomy, the present analysis shows how those anxieties can also be institutionally produced and sustained through the simultaneous thresholds of regression and release, the bifurcation of institutional function, and the retraction of enabling support. This also develops Crewe et al.'s (2014) account of absent-present authority: where absence in their account entails the under-

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use of authority as such, open custody retains its evaluative and disciplinary functions while withdrawing the guidance that would make it navigable.

Withdrawal and responsabilisation are related but not coextensive. Responsibilisation (Rose, 1999; Hannah-Moffat, 2001) transfers responsibility for self-governance onto the individual; the findings here show what occurs when such demands coexist with weakened staff access, procedural clarity, and practical guidance. Institutional withdrawal names this more specific configuration: responsibility is demanded, while some of the institutional means through which expectations can be understood and met are retracted. James's account of the Offender Management Unit, where the burden of initiating contact fell to him alone, captures this configuration precisely.

Although theorised through open prisons, double liminality may illuminate other late-modern institutions and provisions that govern through conditional freedom such as welfare-to-work schemes and probation, where autonomy is simultaneously demanded and withheld. Open custody becomes a microcosm of neoliberal conditionality (Wacquant, 2009): responsibility is offloaded onto individuals, but failure is sanctioned. This paradox, the prison as both incubator of freedom and persistent reminder of its conditionality, lies at the heart of double liminality.

Double liminality captures how penal governance operates through suspension itself, holding individuals perpetually between regression and release, autonomy and control, institutional presence and withdrawal. To make transitional imprisonment truly transitional, regimes must dampen the backward pull of regression and scaffold the forward threshold of release through clarity, proportionality, and zones of experimentation where mistakes do not automatically trigger reversal. Without this, open custody remains an institution of suspended belonging, where prisoners are required to perform the future without ever being allowed to arrive in it.

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