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Postscript: Integrity and Emotion in Prisons Research

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the articles in this issue and on my own experiences of doing qualitative prisons research differently. Two of the most serious challenges faced by researchers "at the deep end" are the emotional demands and the threats to integrity encountered when methods or findings are regarded as "suspect." These challenges are worth the struggle. The collective aim of prison scholarship is to make the prison world "intelligible," to make "moral blindness" less likely or possible. Rich description is akin to actual experience and as such amplifies life, and enlarges sympathies, in ways that can "reshape human consciousness and with it the structure of society." Research is reform, or it can be, as we strive to reconceptualize, or articulate, the strange and painful world that is the prison.

Keywords

research, emotion, reform, prison, prisoners

> A culpable act of violence is morally *inexcusable* but it may be *intelligible* against the narrative context of a perpetrator's life.
>
> —Mihut (2013)

> Prison researchers face a double emotional challenge, of navigating . . . prison research and the unintended consequences of this research.
>
> —Reiter (2014)

One of the leading problems of social science is achieving good enough measurement of complex human phenomena—this problem is not just a question of how to analyze data but, more importantly, how to conceptualize and collect it. Prisoners have often boycotted standard measurement efforts (e.g., as they did in the "Durham study" of the effects of long-term imprisonment).[1] They feel unrecognized and dehumanized by standard risk assessment and evaluation techniques, for good reason. What is distinctive in a growing tradition of qualitative prisons research is the intense participant engagement this approach often solicits (whether this involves mainly staff or mainly prisoners, or both). This leads to greater acceptability of methods in the eyes of participants, as well as more reliable results. It makes "intelligibility" possible. It also raises the problem of emotion in the researcher and the researched.[2] This is appropriate for, as Layder and others have argued, in social life:

> Emotion is . . . ubiquitous, although often operating less obviously and visibly, underground. (Layder, 2004, p. 5)

Expressing, absorbing, and responding adequately to the expression of emotion in others, and handling it in oneself, can be among the most pressing challenges of prisons research. As one prisoner serving a 25-year sentence in a recent study of a maximum security prison, bleakly put it:

> Them first three years . . . I wasn't coping very well with my emotions. (Prisoner, in Liebling, Arnold, & Straub, 2012)

We, the research team, did not always cope so well with our own emotions either, perhaps especially when faced with the challenge of being with and getting to know young, Black, mixed race or White, physically healthy men in their twenties or early thirties who had been sentenced to indeterminate or life sentences with tariffs often longer than their ages. Their condition was simply unmanageable, for them, and for us as their witnesses (see further Liebling et al., 2012; Liebling, Arnold, & Straub, 2013). There were unavoidable emotional challenges. Yet, as Jewkes argues, emotional experiences can serve as a powerful "intellectual resource" in scholarship. They can be "positive and unusually life affirming experiences" (Jewkes, 2012, p. 66).

This is the first whole journal issue to document the emotional, administrative, practical, and moral realities and challenges of qualitative prisons research. It represents an

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important turning point in the field (a maturing and diversifying one, perhaps, since I tamed my 1999 article *Doing Prison Research* for publication in *Theoretical Criminology*) and a welcome departure from the purely confessional accounts sometimes found under the heading of reflexivity. There is always a risk that as researchers talk more, prisoners talk less, as their authentic selves retreat from endless risk assessment and misrepresentation (as we found in the study above; and see Cohen & Taylor, 1977). That is not the case here, as the authors combine sociological insights with moving descriptions of doing "real world" research. Prisoners, ex-prisoners, and fieldworkers talk, together and separately, and what they have to say is deeply expressive. This powerful issue brings together scholars from many disciplines and methodological traditions, and describes the creativity often required to succeed in the field, without harming one's self or others, triggering the drawbridge, or colluding in the many uncomfortable practices punishment invites: overusing power, failing to "see" or feel, failing to trust a fellow human being, or colluding in discrimination and exclusion.

When we conduct social science research in criminal justice settings, we enter a world in which power flows overtly, and become infused with as well as subject to it. Sometimes, without sufficient awareness, we wield it. We might interview "upward," "downward," or across less obvious and shifting configurations of power or levels of authority, involving gender, age, ethnicity and nationality, class, and professional and other personal characteristics, all with hidden or explicit implications for status and positioning. To build trust, solicit authenticity, know the culture, and overcome distance among participants, we are required to both claim and respect status. The appropriate master status of all in social science research is "personhood," with all the equal claims to privacy, dignity, and respect that this term implies.[3] This is not an easy or straightforward requirement to honor in a prison setting. The question of whose account can be trusted is loaded in favor of the superordinate and against the subordinate in an especially marked way, as evidenced by the frequency of the challenges prison researchers face to their narratives of prisoners' lives and experience, as well as the lack of challenge to the official narratives embedded in day to day operational practice.

The articles in this special section of *Qualitative Inquiry* will constitute a guide and companion to many of those setting out to explore the prison empirically, whether for the first time, or as they return to this often inaccessible and testing site. The challenges range from tackling the many barriers to access, of all types and levels (formal, informal, "ethical," and cultural), to "the emotional burdens of 'bearing witness' to the pains inherent in modern imprisonment" (Reiter, this issue), and the exposure of one's own body and soul to the "desecration of self" inflicted on the punished and otherwise imprisoned once inside. As Ugelvik writes, conflict in the field may be both inevitable, and instructive, and as Newbold et al. suggest, prisons are "emotionally provocative," so there is always turbulence. These provocations require careful management at all times, but they also need attention, of a particular kind (see Crewe, this issue) for they both *constitute*, and serve as a *guide* in the analysis of, data.

Helen Arnold, Christina Straub, and I described our return to Whitemoor maximum security prison after 12 years to conduct a repeat ethnography there as "research beyond the conventional." There is something extraordinarily difficult about getting to know a prison, from the lengths one has to go to, to get in (18 locked gates, a requirement to undergo personal protection training, and a daily search), to organizing each interview or group discussion (names checked with security, a deal struck to count the discussion as "purposeful activity," an unwilling wing officer), to the staggering effects of hearing the words from a 32-year-old, "I'm doing natural life, Miss." This is no ordinary research environment. It brings about an "existential chill," as Rod Earle so starkly puts it (in this issue), because the prison is a "soul sapping" institution, and no decent researcher can dodge the consequences. We created a regular "dialogue group" with a dozen regular attendees at the early stages of the project, and this cumulative conversational space allowed for slow and careful entry into the field, some shared meaning making, and for important connections to be made, which set the tone for the period to come. We were able to reveal something of ourselves as well as get to know a diverse group of prisoners, in one of the many breaches of institutional boundaries that research inevitably brings about. On the first occasion, a moment occurred within minutes where members of the group decided to bring the chairs, which had been set out somewhat formally by staff, closer together. We had all had the same thought. Two prisoners put this into action. We knew at that moment that the project was going to "go well" (that is, take us deeply in). We were all seeking connection, and it was welcome when a signal permitted it. Social distance must be reduced if research scholars are to penetrate the worlds they seek to enter. This is a time-consuming and precarious process. There is much to be said for "slow science" (Beyens et al., 2013) in which we can "lose our research questions" and just live as people, from time to time, in the environments we are seeking to understand.

The repeated Whitemoor study constituted emotional "edgework" (Ferrell & Hamm, 1998). It was organized but deep, vivid, immersed, and intrusive—on us as well as on our research participants. One of the first readers of our final report described the account as "heartbreaking." When she said it, I thought that was precisely the right word. One of the many transformations observable between the first study and the second was the reduction in levels of trust

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flowing in the prison. While prisons are generally "low-trust environments," this shift from "a little" to "barely any" made the prison feel paralyzed and destructive. The environment was more than usually impenetrable. Much of what we found reflected a new context and its effects: a prison that was more "new penological" in many respects and an era that is more punitive and risk-laden than the era we were in before, during the first study (1998-1999; see Liebling & Price, 1999). There were prisoners who did not (dare to) reveal critical information about themselves, which we sometimes learned from other sources. There were so many comings and goings at senior management level throughout the course of the project, that it was difficult to establish relationships. This had repercussions.

Prisoners at Whitemoor the second time around described a crisis of *identity* and a crisis of *recognition*. We found long-term prisoners at early stages in their sentences struggling to survive psychologically, or to find meaning in their environments. Prisoners complained often that love, meaning, and identity were nowhere to be found, and yet constituted deep and pressing needs. They were often emotional and positive, when they found education or music. Undertaking Open University degrees led to a new perspective on their pasts and futures, and a greater understanding of the social context in which their lives had taken shape. This motivated and energized them. So there was considerable and intense emotion at Whitemoor, in many directions, and also much emotion management going on. I learned much about my lack of tolerance for aspects of modern penal policy and politics. New penological practices produce different emotions, in staff, prisoners, Governors, and in researchers and their teams. We neglect their meaning at our peril.

Ferrell and Hamm suggest that "our goal should be the integration and full use of ourselves as, simultaneously, complex human beings with unique individual biographies and trained and dedicated researchers" (p. 18). Ferrell also argues that "methodological choices inevitably intertwine with theoretical stances [and] political choices" Ferrell (1998, p. 25). Fleisher (1998) says, "It takes courage to tell the truth" (p. 55). Wacquant suggests that some types of ethnographic projects "demand an extraordinary investment in time, physical courage and intellectual energy" . . . "including after the data collection phase" (L. Wacquant, personal communication, October 17, 2011). The study, which we are still digesting, challenged our professional identities and views about the world (and prisons) as well as our emotional well-being.

Prisons are primarily about extreme and varying uses of power and authority, as well as about complex social organization and punishment practices, and as Layder (2004) has argued, "emotion is a constant companion of power." Distinctions in the use of power or authority give rise to distinctive emotional climates in prison. These kinds of differences—in what might be called staff–prisoner relationships, but which are really differences in approaches to, conceptions of, and uses or underuses of power—produce emotions in those on the receiving end, and constitute a substantial part of the explanation for variations in distress and suicide in individual prisons (Liebling, Durie, Stiles, & Tait, 2005). It is relatively easy in a prison to provide what Barbalet (1998) refers to as "sociological critique through an emotions perspective" (p. 5) as people litter their accounts of what is going on with their emotional reactions to the environment. Experience is intensified. So of course researchers experience emotions when they do research in prison. I have argued elsewhere that "emotions constitute data" (Liebling, 1999). We often learn most when our bodies do the work for us, detecting cues, recognizing danger, sensing tension, or sharing frustration. This is tricky territory. Can we trust our emotional physiologies? Do they change over a life course? Is the researcher who studied Whitemoor prison in 1998 similarly configured in 2010? I am not sure.

As Weber argued, sociology "concerns itself with the interpretive understanding of social action" . . . (Weber, 1968, p. 4). "Empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place" (Weber, 1968, p. 5, in Ferrell, 1998, p. 27). In other words, we may understand affectual worlds more deeply when we have access to or experience of those emotions in ourselves. Evaluations of one's circumstances are often performed below the level of consciousness—at the level of emotion. So prisoners' evaluations, and also our own as researchers in the field, are shaped by their experience of feelings. Emotion is a source of evaluation of circumstances. This is important, but also has to be managed, and guarded by careful, painstaking research methods, and some distance.

That this issue includes several "insider" or ex-convict accounts of prisons research makes it exceptional, and provides a welcome insight into the "trilateral reflexive framework of field immersion, personal biography and professional distance" that all scholars of the prison face, but resolve (or fail to resolve) in different ways. The personal encounters that stay with us the longest may resonate with our own sensitivities, whether we acknowledge them or not, with the ghosts of our pasts, or the uncomfortable present, in ways that even our research participants might find surprising (the projections and assumptions as to biography exist on both sides of the research encounter). Ben Crewe addresses the complexities of the self in the research setting, and the attempts of prison sociologists to face, evade, interrogate, or manage feeling or the self in the field. It is almost always better to reflect with others—as he suggests, for it is not always possible to "know thyself" fully, at the time, or even many years later. We may all need to revalidate our humanity during a period of intense data collection (each day can feel so

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"intense"), and this is rarely accomplished alone. Inevitably doing prisons research brings about accusations, among many other discomforts: "you lot give them power," "whose side are you on?", "what's in this for us?", and "how do I know you're not a spy!" These unwelcome challenges to our own integrity (from all sides) can be among the toughest questions we face.

That this collection is a celebration of the qualitative needs little further endorsement from me, but I hope that one of its effects is to illustrate with power the centrality of observation, the significance of ethnographic writing (e.g., for prisoners as well as for the field), and the potential for "storytelling" or narrative accounts to humanize both the research process and the penal world. All of these methods are more time-consuming than others (or we) realize and difficult to justify in the formal applications for funding and for access ("how many days, of what sort of contact, is required, for what purpose?"); yet without them, our understanding and analysis is limited. Ethnography depends on the establishment of ongoing empathetic relationships with others. How can this requirement be expressed in a process that requires the specification of what number of interviews, of what length, in advance, and in a climate where extensive or continued contact is construed as a risk (of "conditioning" or manipulation)? These are real and pressing challenges. If one of the purposes of this issue is to "revive the ethnographic perspective" (Newbold et al., this issue), it achieves this exceptionally well.

The collection raises some interesting and important questions about what kinds of skills and qualities make good prisons researchers: if "facing and overcoming adversity" is one of them (see Earle, this issue), then we have a striking resonance with some of the criminological and social work literature on "wounded healers" making the best supporters of people on parole, or in trouble (see, for example, Armstrong, 2013). Prisons are full of "incompletely healed wounds" (Sparks, 2002, p. 563) and many of its forms and behaviors pick at and expose these wounds. No wonder that prisoners find those who carry wounds (well) something of a relief. This proposed "distinguishing feature" of British Convict Criminology raises one of the paradoxes of prison life (and work): that "the right place to be" is often disturbingly close to "the wrong place to be" on many dimensions (like trust, care, or a relationship boundary): what of our vulnerabilities and weaknesses? What if we trust just a little too much, or "unintelligently," in this instance? What if, during this extended encounter, we forget we are in prison, and feel a form of friendship building? These are the very problems that prisons pose: they intensify "virtues in conflict"; they make us draw undrawable boundaries. The answer for us socially, and morally, is not to shut the conflicts down, but to face them, and make a sound judgment. Sometimes the dilemma posed is simply unacceptable. The guidance that exists is littered with risk aversion. We know that risk thinking aggravates violence, damages social order, inflicts wounds, and distorts human relationships (e.g., Harcourt, 2007). How do we, then, navigate our way, in an environment that is self-consciously risk avoidant? How can we "know the field" (Rowe, this issue) in our own way, and not as it is structured, with such conviction, by others?

American Convict Criminology, in contrast to the fledgling British movement, has flourished, over a relatively long period of time, and its proponents have long since made the important point that "prisoner viewpoints are an essential part" of any satisfactory "correctional picture" (Newbold et al., this issue). Of course ex-convicts speak the language of prison, can read the culture, and they generate trust with participants with relative ease (as ex-prisoners in various employee and helping roles do). Partnerships with established academics have been one successful means of harnessing the skills and strengths of both parties, keeping the narrative both vivid and impartial. There are tensions and dilemmas in these roles too (how far should ex-prisoners advise governments or become co-opted into the system?). As Newbold et al. argue (this issue) the key for us all is excellent professional methods: lived experience should form the basis of analysis rather than constitute the account. There are many fine examples of such work.

I have argued, with colleagues, that there is a kind of "theology of the person" that characterizes the best prison research, but this concept of personhood requires movement beyond boundaries. We used the term (following a conversation with a prison chaplain) to describe the now unusual kind of "unassuming" (that is, nonjudgmental) dialogue that sometimes takes place between chaplains and long-term prisoners in the margins of an increasingly heavily policed conversational world. In other words, "I meet you as a person, let's start our conversation from there." Let us "sit where they sit"—on the bed, in a cell, in the garden on a bench, in better prisons, and just see what you have to say. Prison sociology—done "right"—can humanize our understanding of the prison and the prisoner in ways that are of deep significance not just to penological scholarship, but also to late modern fractured communities. We are all in need of better dialogue: As Buber (1937/2010) suggested,

> That peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand on us. (in Kramer, 2003, p. viii)

Prisoners are, after all, members of communities, temporarily (if for growing and sometimes indefinite periods) excluded, stigmatized, and rendered "non-citizens." Their yearnings, needs, and identities are shaped in those communities and carried with them into prison. The changing shape and tone of the prison could not be more relevant to

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the understanding of changes taking place in society (see, for example, Liebling & Arnold, 2012). That prisoners feel less "recognized" ([see Honneth], 1995) by those who imprison and risk-assess them suggests a more important role for qualitative research, whatever the difficulties.

The collective aim of prison scholarship, I believe, is to make the prison world, and the individuals within it, "intelligible," to make the kind of "moral blindness" described by Bauman and Donskis less possible (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). Accurate, rich description (as in an outstanding realist novel or painting) is akin to "actual experience" and as such amplifies life, and enlarges sympathies, in ways that can "reshape human consciousness and with it the structure of society" (Creeger, 1970, p. 8). Research *is* reform, or it can be, as we strive to reconceptualize, or articulate, the strange and painful world that is the prison, to "change the perceptual world" to solve some analytic puzzles about it. Prison staff are less visible in this collection than they might have been: Qualitative analysis should include all the relevant players, for which they have their human narratives to tell too.

When prisons research is conducted closely, and "off the policy agenda" it often ends up with huge buy-in from the field, even when the account is critical. A recognizable description, with a promising conceptual analysis, is valuable from all perspectives. This buy-in (from those often positioned below official research gatekeepers) is significant, and should encourage us to pursue and defend a research agenda, and methodological approach, that we can take pride in. The toughest critics tend to be placed higher up in the organization, and they sometimes wield their power in ways that are unsettling when we become the "bearer of bad tidings" or the transmitters of "difficult truths" (Misztal, 2007, p. 36). It is important, however difficult, at these times to retain and defend the integrity of the research; to remain "faithful to yourself" (Misztal, 2007, p. 35): I found that there are often quiet (or more active) allies elsewhere in the organization, who offer affirmation and encouragement at such times.

There is one other important question raised by this issue, but not directly addressed, which is the stark difference in the state of prisons research, and access, in different jurisdictions (only three are represented here—the United Kingdom, the United States, and Norway). These differences stand in need of further analysis. Is there any relationship between access to prisons for a research community, and the state of penal policy and politics? On this point, there is one other collection, and a few assorted "gems" that might serve as companions to this issue: the recently published "*Pains of Doing Criminological Research*" published by a team of Belgian criminological scholars (Beyens et al., 2013) and, for example, the contribution by Sparks on the both brutal and humane story of the Barlinnie Special Unit in Scotland. No one has written more powerfully on the unintended consequences of prisons research than Richard Sparks (2002), and I commend his account of the politics of its demise, and the role one research project may have played in it, to anyone entering or active in this field, as a warning, and as a fine example of reflexive critique. Several of the chapters in the Belgian "pains" book refer to prisons research in particular. Together, these volumes provide a challenge to some of the unrealistic expectations of, and constraints upon, research held or imposed by policy makers, as well as a set of resources aimed at making the prisons research task more manageable, transparent, and bearable. I have found myself recommending both to many. The best social science is always and inevitably "approximate, intuitive, and developmental." It requires us to know the field emotionally, as well as intellectually (Rowe, this issue). If we can be honest about how it works, and feels, we might develop better skills for conducting our craft, as well as better guidance for the generations that will follow. As Atkinson wrote (referred to in Rowe's article), "the actual lived experience of fieldwork confronts, disrupts, and troubles the self" (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 54). These confrontations often give rise to "substantive insights," but only the boldest scholars face these disruptions without trepidation or support.

There are important structural/institutional matters not raised in this issue (although some of them have been raised by others: see, for example, Simon, 2000), which impact and constrain the craft of prisons research, and perhaps qualitative prisons research in particular: the organization and measurement of academic work, the "social science as hard science" movement, the insistence by research councils on research contributing directly to the economy, the sheer demands of long, solid exposure to prison worlds, and the lack of attention paid to, or funding for, sociological prisons research in developing countries. None of these problems have obvious solutions. The best research is impossible without assistance and consent from the research participants. Doing prisons research differently requires collective effort, persistence, courage, and some faith in a better future, quite apart from advanced research skills. I hope this contribution stimulates and encourages more of it.

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Notes

1. See Cohen and Taylor's (1977) account of this Home Office study in the Appendix to their *Psychological Survival*.
2. As Yvonne Jewkes has described in her moving 2012 article in *Qualitative Inquiry*, to which this volume constitutes a response.
3. For a helpful discussion on these issues in relation to research on children, see Fine and Sandstrom (1988); on interviewing "upward," see, for example, Wright Mills (1956), Liebling (2001), and Reiner (1991).

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