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Tales from prison: Reflections on a decade of offender research

Viewpoint

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Abstract

Purpose

In this short article, I make reflections from prison research studies I have undertaken over the last ten years.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Some reflections come from personal diaries while others are just lasting memories which made a significant impact on me as a young researcher.

Findings

The reflections highlight several important aspects of researching prisons: a) that people in prison may be quite selective about information they disclose if interviewed; b) that prisons, rather than prisoners, can act as significant barriers for researchers – operationally as well as institutionally; and c) this why the researcher should try to go beyond ‘the interview’ at all opportunities and look to engage as much as possible with interviewees – even if it means walking around the wing, playing pool with them or seeing their cells.

Originality/value

The short article will be useful for any researchers entering custody with the task of undertaking quick-fire research studies.

Key words: Prisons, offenders, reflections, research.

Introduction

This short commentary reflects on research I have undertaken over the last decade with offenders in prison. It is really concerned with key moments and memories which made lasting impressions on me as a young researcher and led me to continue undertaking research to seek ways in which to help people through research. Like many students, in 2001, I graduated and faced the giant prospect of finding some way to give my life direction (and perhaps earn a bit of money). I don't even remember if I was concerned about doing either. I had a flavour of research having undertaken data

entry at the Institute of Psychiatry (IOP) toward the end of my undergraduate degree. In some desperate measure, a few days before I left the IOP in May 2001, I sent my CV out to various departments. By some fortune, it must have landed on the right desk at the right time because a week later, I was contacted by Imperial College who were looking for someone to step in at the last minute to undertake interviews with drug-using offenders in prison. It seems someone had not taken up a position. And so began the decade. Over the last ten years, I have visited about 25 different prisons throughout the country undertaking research; mostly to do with drug use, offending and service provision. Some I visited only once while others became quite familiar. Some moments on which I reflect are taken from personal diaries while others just stick out in my memory. The reflections highlight the people in prison, the realities of the research contexts and how, all too often, researching in prisons can be difficult – not necessarily because of the clientele but possibly more so because of operational and institutional constraints.

The deep end

Very little could prepare me for my first prison interview in 2001. I had done some interview role playing with my new fellow colleagues who had previously undertaken some work with offenders but I suppose it was something one could only learn by being face-to-face with someone 'inside'. HMP Cookham Wood didn't look especially intimidating from the outside but the stocky female prison guard made me feel otherwise. At least I was with other female colleagues who had some experience of interviewing. We stop and start at so many doors and locks while the guard fumbles through the hundreds of keys on her chain to open the next. Finally, some fifteen minutes later (and probably only fifteen metres later), I am led out into the wing. My colleagues are separated and taken off for the first interviews. We only have about 20 minutes to complete each survey on drug use; 20 minutes for someone to fill their life into a survey which, now on reflection, wasn't really asking the right questions.

I don't know whether being alone with prisoners in their cells was permitted from 2001 to 2003, but it seemed to be common practice in most prisons at the time. On this occasion, as I arrive on the wing, the guard leads me into a cell with a woman. I am not locked in but the door is pulled to because the other two colleagues had taken the only interview rooms on the wing. This is my first time face to face with an 'offender'. She seems quite calm, as her tattooed arm lifts her cup of tea for periodic sips. Unfortunately, I am dressed very smartly (a requisite for a researcher in prisons which I have now learnt is not necessary). I approach to shake her hand and start the survey: "*For what crime are you in prison?*" I ask officially. She looks at me smiles and starts to chuckle – not in a dark, Count Dracula manner but it is an endearing chuckle. This prompts me to smile at this but as she says "*murder, mate*" my smile slowly disappears: "*stabbed my boyfriend nine times in the heart*". Slightly taken back from this answer which doesn't seem to fit anything in my box, I just continue with the conversation.

The person behind the prison interview and the girl behind the bars

This time I am visiting different young offender institutions. Looking back, I think this was certainly more difficult for me; as someone still quite young interviewing people not much younger than me. By now I am used to the potential problems of getting the prisons. On this study, I make a pointless journey up to HMP Wakefield only to return the same day when the prison guards on reception claim they have 'no paperwork' for my visit. I am also used to the jingling noise of the

keys, the thick heavy doors which have to be opened every few seconds and the odd banter between offenders and the 'screws'. This time I am in a YOI New Hall for young girls. Once again, I have no interview room available and my confidential interviews about drugs, alcohol and service provision threaten to echo around the wing. Once again, I am led in. The wing has several levels and I am led around to what looks a leisure area; there is a TV, books and various magazines. Everyone else is on 'activity' or 'education' so there is hardly anyone on the wing. As I wait, I am approached Deanne who is 15 and has already been in prison four times for various violent offences. Indeed, she walks aggressively and carries the image of her offences. I feel guilty about the information I am collecting because the way in which she answers makes me feel like she has told so many people the same thing so many times. I also feel she is quite selective with me. She gives me short answers, won't expand on anything and the interview lasts only 20 minutes. "*You done yet, mister?*" she mumbles. I close my notes and she shuffles off ahead of me.

The guard then comes over to officially chaperone her away; she scuffs the floor with her flip flops, each step awkward and tired. While the guard tells Deanne to go to her cell, I am lead towards the wing exit. There is then a flurry of exchanges on the guard's radio and she tells me there is a prison lockdown (which means no one can move from wing to wing including me). I stand around looking for things to entertain me. Deanne lingers on the second floor and looks down at me for a minute or two. She shouts down "*oi mister, you wanna see my cell*". I ask the guard if this is possible. The guard nods her head and I bound up the two levels of stairs, while the guard rolls her eyes and slowly follows. As I walk into her cell, I am completely blown away. Deanne jumps on the bed. "*Look, this is my mum and my sister*" and childishly waves a picture of her family at me. As I smile looking at the picture, my eyes divert to the damp and mouldy wall which is littered with drawings, poems, letters; they come alive in the breeze as do the cut out paper-angels flapping from one of the prison bars. She continues to jump around showing me moments from her life. She grabs a letter from her mum and shoves it in my hand: "*dis one is my favourite*": "*We will always love you. Come home soon*" it reads.

Playin' pool

Because of my numerous visits to HMP Brixton, I have come to know the CARAT¹ team quite well – so well that I only need give my name at the prison gate and the manager meets me within a few minutes. Once again I am here to interview some people about their offending and drug use. On this day, I am to meet three men. I walk on to the wing and am generally surrounded by large men; some of whom acknowledge me "*alwight boss*". I nod to those who make my acquaintance. Once again, because of the lack of rooms and space in general, I am to interview in an old cell. I am led in and sit in the corner while the first man enters. Pete does not conform to the average size of the men on the wing but has quite an extensive criminal history which, he says, was exacerbated by the use of crack and then heroin. He looks quite damaged, has numerous scars and bruises, and slurs his speech. The second man comes in and I feel more comfortable that he fits the general pattern of the chaps on the wing; Dwayne is about 6 ft 6, built as if he could snap me with one hand and shuffles rather than walks to indicate how potentially hard and heavy he is. Although I am to interview three,

¹ CARAT stands for Counselling Advice Referral Assessment Throughcare. The workers signpost prisoners to relevant programmes which will benefit their recovery/support.

only two attend and again I am left with time to kill. The CARAT worker is due to return in 40 minutes so I follow Dwayne down to the centre of the wing. There sits an empty pool table in the centre of the wing. He asks me if I want a game. Now I have to say I am pretty good at pool but I am not about to show Dwayne how good I really am. I am confident of a win. Dwayne gives me "*de best cue, bruv*" which he thinks will be an advantage. Of the five games we play in that 40 minutes, I only grace the table five times (and three of those were to break); Dwayne completely wipes the floor with me – a 5-0 drubbing.

A walk on the wing

The Victorian prisons really evoke a sense of history for me. Although quite depressing and dirty, there is something oddly intimate about them – especially about HMP Brixton. Once again, I am interviewing drug users with offending histories – or visa versa. For some reason, the medical officer can't locate the correct person for me to interview. I follow him around the packed wing, weaving in and out of large men who look at me as I walk past. He shows me where I am to be undertaking the interviews and tells me to stay on the wing while he goes to see where the prisoner has been put/transferred. I get talking to a couple of chaps who hang over the staircase with long brooms in their hands. When a guard walks past, they suddenly get a little more active with their brushes. I get a little bored standing there and since I have no one to talk to, I go for a walk. A young man called Steve offers me a tour. He introduces me to 'Chuck, Babs, Pablo', however, as I stroll along, I hear a crunch under my shoe. Thinking whatever it is will dislodge itself with another step, I continue. However, the crunch becomes an awkward scratch under my shoe with each step I take. It grates on me – like eating sand in a sandwich or scraping nails down a blackboard. I stop and look under my shoe where there is, embedded between the rubber, a whole tooth (including root). Steve starts to smile as I attempt to pick it out with my fingernail.

Daily reminders of freedom

HMP Portland sits on an island overlooking Weymouth on the south coast. I have to take a taxi from Weymouth station as there is no transport. As I cross the bridge toward the island, the driver starts to tell me stories about the local community on the island and prisoners, concluding that there is no difference because both populations never leave the island. For a good 20 years or so, this prison has held about 500 young men. I am here, once again, to interview some of them about what support they would want when they are released from custody. It seems quite patronising to ask most of them this question since most I end up talking to already seem to have been in and out so many times (even as young men) that they relay that little can help them. Others are deeply critical and angry of what needs to be provided.

This time I have my own room – albeit the cold games room which harbours a snooker table. There I stay all day and interview six young men about these issues. When the seventh fails to emerge from his waiting place outside the room, I call over the guard who tells me that he had to be transferred to another part of the prison. I stress the importance of his interview and the guard reluctantly takes me on a laborious journey across to the other side of the prison. When we finally reach the medical centre, where the young man is having a check up, the guard suggests we go back to the wing to undertake the interview. This time we take a different route. I start to talk to Rob, my potential interviewee, as we walk into an open passageway between the wings. The wind whistles through the large gaps in the windows which overlook the white-crested sea waves, the south coast

and freedom. Rob is frequently led down this passageway between the wing and the medical centre. He tells me this is the worst part of the prison (this passageway). When I ask why, he tells me to look around. I confess to being oblivious to what he is talking about and he says “*Well, at least in my cell I don't ave a view. Look [points out across the sea] I can see the life I want out there and it don't feel good.*”

Conclusion

This article has used five moments, albeit short exchanges, to highlight the realities of undertaking prison research studies. Anyone thinking of doing such research won't find this kind of advice in a textbook – I certainly didn't. I did find it through firsthand experience; from my very first interview when I was plunged in at the deep end. That day I found it difficult to stick to my closed-questioned survey about ‘drug misuse’ and found it far more useful to talk to the woman in her cell. I confess that I was also not looking forward to interviewing Deanne. After all, she gave all the clues that it would be a problematic interview – aggressive look, short answers, disengaged responses. However, this was not Deanne and I only got a glimpse of the girl behind the offender when I saw her cell. By the time I met Dwayne, I felt quite comfortable in prisons; despite the intimidating physical features of 90% of the populations. However, I have found that people don't generally conform to those images. Dwayne certainly didn't even though he did completely hammer me while playing pool. However, despite meeting Chuck, Babs and Pablo, there are moments when I am reminded of where I am – in prison. Stepping on a whole tooth in HMP Brixton quickly brought me back to this reality. And I think really engaging in this way helps the researcher to understand the perspective of those under study. After all, without some discussion with Rob I would not have heard intimate thoughts about how he really *feels* on a daily basis.

These people in prison taught me these things. Firstly, that although they are in prison, it does not mean they are different and we should not judge the character by the list of their offences or the way they walk or look. Yes, they may give selective information about themselves but wouldn't you if someone was asking you personal questions about your drug use history without any kind of relationship? Secondly, prisons can be extremely restrictive places to research. One has to navigate around operational procedures and mostly has to adhere to strict codes (apart from interviewing alone in cells!). However, these processes can be advantageous. Where's the harm in spending a bit more time with the people on the wing? This leads me to my last point. The researcher should try to go beyond ‘the interview’ at all opportunities and look to engage as much as possible with interviewees – even if it means walking around the wing, playing pool or seeing their cells. I have found that people don't really live by their image in prison which is why spending time with them to talk about other issues aside from my research rationale gave me a wider understanding of what prison is, what it does and how people really feel about it. This way you get a glimpse of the person, rather than just a gaze at the prisoner.

Exposure to these emotional exchanges definitely made more me motivated to pursue further research and get to the bottom of social problems. From the very first interview I undertook in prison, I realised we were asking the wrong questions. Indeed, it was the shortfall of pretty much all of these studies which led me to use ethnographic methods with crack cocaine users and other marginalised/misunderstood populations. I have never really looked back. Well, I have now.