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An Ethnographic Account of Doing Survey Research in Prison: Descriptions, Reflections, and Suggestions from the Field

Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic account of my day-to-day experiences as a survey researcher in men's prisons in the United States. I outline challenges I encountered in the field and share personal reflections on interviewing people who are incarcerated. I then put forth a series of implications and suggestions for those who plan to conduct similar studies. Researchers' firsthand accounts of the data collection process and research settings are crucial because they provide instruction for other scholars. Yet, these aspects of doing research are conventionally ignored in survey researchers' scholarly publications. Accordingly, this article presents an examination of my work as a survey researcher through an interpretive frame, calls for reflective approaches to conducting quantitative research, and provides a primer on doing research in prison settings.

Keywords

Field Research; Survey Research; Total Institution; Incarceration; Prison; Ethnography; Reflective Research.

From winter 2005 through spring 2006 I spent an average of three to four days a week in the field administering face-to-face self-report surveys. These surveys were conducted for a study of 250 incarcerated men and were carried out in four minimum and medium security, adult prisons in the Midwestern United States.² Nearly half of those interviewed were subsequently invited to do a follow-up survey a few weeks after their initial interviews so the test-retest reliability of quantitative data could be assessed. The main research questions from this project focused on inmates' backgrounds and life circumstances prior to being sent to prison; and participation in the study was voluntary. Prisoners who chose to be interviewed were initially recruited in brief face-to-face meetings that explained the project's objectives and stressed the voluntary nature of their participation.

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² The initial protocol included plans to also interview female prisoners. However, the institutions that housed female prisoners could not accommodate this project because they were already overburdened with research requests.

As a novice researcher preparing to survey prisoners, I would have benefited from reading about other survey researchers' experiences. However, I found few published accounts that described the actual process of doing research in prison. Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings (2004) assembled a thorough guide for making inroads into official agencies to collect and analyze data. Unfortunately, few prior researchers have elaborated on the process of doing research in prisons once access has been secured. Moreover, published works that do contain descriptions of the research process have resulted primarily from qualitative (Crewe 2009; Davidson 1974; Davies 2000; Jacobs 1974; King 2000; Martin 2000; Owen 1998; but also see Liebling 1999) and participatory (Castellano 2007; Marquart 1986) studies of correctional settings. In contrast, descriptions of research settings are conspicuously absent from prisoner studies that rely on quantitative methods, and the actual process of collecting survey data in prisons is typically shrouded in mystery.

Clarke (1975) long ago argued that more space is needed in sociology for valuable insights from the research process that do not fit within the bounds of positivism and other conventional social science notions of data. Although many qualitative researchers have taken this admonition to heart (Emerson 1981), quantitative researchers continue to focus almost exclusively on data analyses and research findings within their written works. Whether it is the outcome of the author or the editor's decision making, there are at least two reasons why it is problematic to take what happens before quantitative data are analytically taken for granted. First, insights that can potentially inform and contextualize quantitative data analyses go untapped when the research process and research setting are ignored. Second, when written accounts fail to acknowledge the data collection process other scholars are deprived of opportunities to become sensitized to challenges and dilemmas they will potentially face in their own research. This second concern serves as a primary organizing theme for this article.

In the following sections I will share an ethnographic account of my work as a survey researcher in prison. I am pointedly descriptive, and given my emphasis on the research process I do not report empirical findings. I begin by tracing the history of ethnography in prison research. I go on to chronicle day-to-day dynamics I encountered in the field; and I then offer a sample of personal reflections. These sections are intended to demystify the actual process of doing survey research in prison. I then derive implications from my reflections, and I conclude by presenting a list of suggestions that recapitulates this article's main themes and illuminates some of the unknowns that those aspiring to do research in prison may face in their own work. My experiences are framed using themes that are salient in the qualitative literature, and the implications and suggestions I provide are generally applicable to both qualitative and quantitative researchers who work in prison settings. Yet, at times, I speak directly to other survey researchers in an effort to invite them to engage issues that are commonly taken for granted by those who do not view themselves as having a qualitative orientation.

As Ryan and Golden (2006) found when studying Irish immigrants in London, many interesting and important observations other than those captured by survey instruments emerge when working in the field. For instance, two themes intertwined with the collection of my data that went untapped by my instrument were researcher's presentation of self and us/them dichotomies among prisoners and staff. Recurring contextual dynamics such as these were fascinating and instructive, and I hope students and other researchers will benefit from reading about them.

The ethnographic tradition in prison research

Liebling succinctly notes,

Ethnography is the most basic form of social research—and resembles the way in which people ordinarily make sense of their world ... It can include observation, participation, interviewing and almost any other form of interaction between ourselves, the researchers and the social world. (2001:475)

When applying this notion of ethnography, a number of high profile prison studies and prison scholars stretching back to the 1940s have employed ethnographic methods. Devising an exhaustive list of prison ethnographies goes beyond the scope and objectives of this article. I therefore provide a sample of selected key works and outline a brief history of notable developments in the use of ethnography in prison research.

Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* was published in 1940 and is typically regarded as the first comprehensive sociological study of prison culture. It is one of the classic prison ethnographies, and it continues to be cited by contemporary prison scholars. Clemmer worked as a prison sociologist in a men's prison and his data consisted of close to ten years of observations and interactions gained from prisoners during the 1930s. The concept of 'prisonization,' which refers to the socialization of inmates into the prison culture, is one of the most enduring contributions from Clemmer's research.

The Society of Captives, typically regarded as the other classic ethnography of prison culture, was published by Gresham Sykes in 1958. Sykes based his research on data collected from a New Jersey men's prison over a three year period. One of the most prominent themes of this study is its conclusion that prevalent features of prison culture result from the conditions of restrictive prison environments. For instance, Sykes identified a number of deprivations that prisoners routinely face, including a lack of heterosexual relations and limited autonomy and security. Prisoners compensate for these deprivations by developing status systems whose norms and values comprise the prison culture.

The works of Clemmer and Sykes together provided the foundation from which prison culture has commonly been understood. Some of the more notable prison ethnographies from the 1960s to 1980s moved beyond prison culture and focused on core sociological themes such as gender, race, and ethnicity. For instance, Ward and Kassbaum (1965) published the first examination of women in prison. They initially set out to compare male and female prisoners' experiences, and among the main findings was that close to half of the women they studied engaged in homosexuality to cope with the distressing conditions of confinement. A few decades later Zimmer (1986) published a book that examined the resistance female correctional officers encountered upon entering male prisons in the aftermath of Title VII civil rights legislation. Zimmer found that women were met with substantial resentment from male staff who disdained the inclusion of women as guards in men's prisons. Ward and Kassbaum's study and Zimmer's research were similar in that they utilized in-depth interviewing and observation.

Race and ethnicity have been other themes of interest for prison ethnographers. Leo Carroll's *Hacks, Blacks, and Cons* was published in 1974 and provided the first examination of racial conflicts behind bars. Carroll posited that broader prison reforms improved conditions of incarceration and the treatment of inmates by staff. An outcome of these changes was that prisoner solidarity broke down because the

challenges of being imprisoned that previously brought inmates together became less pronounced. At the same time, social movements on the outside led African Americans on the inside to adopt a greater sense of black consciousness. Together these forces contributed to escalating racial tension in prisons and an increase in power by Black prisoners at the expense of White prisoners. Another book published in 1974 was *Chicano Prisoners: The Key to San Quentin* by Theodore Davidson, which provided the first examination of Chicano inmates' experiences behind bars. Davidson's work is noteworthy because it describes the formative years of the prison gangs that have more recently gone on to plague the California prison system.

The ethnographic tradition in prison research has continued into the present era. Within the last decade Lorna Rhodes (2004) conducted research in maximum security prisons in Washington State, while Ben Crewe (2007, 2009) examined a medium security prison in England. Each of these high profile prison scholars immersed themselves in their respective prison environments to examine the mechanisms, forms, and expressions of power and control exercised by prisons over prisoners.

Other recent prison ethnographies have given voice to a range of experiences and processes found in prison environments that are either misunderstood or overlooked. For instance, Barbara Owen (1998) expanded on earlier studies of female prisoner subcultures in her ethnography of a large women's prison in California, while Valerie Jenness (2010) collected ethnographic insights into transgendered inmates' lives and the institutional practices for classifying and housing them in men's prisons. Two final contemporary prison ethnographies that have received considerable attention were both conducted at San Quentin. John Irwin (2009) studied how male prisoners serving life sentences for murder became redeemed and empathetic individuals over the course of several years of incarceration, while Megan Comfort (2008) did interviews and observation in San Quentin's visiting room and found that inmates' female partners were profoundly impacted by institutional rules and limits imposed by incarceration. These restrictions often led to frustration and pain, though at other times they contributed to redefined relationships that were ultimately more desirable.

These brief synopses of foundational studies underscore the ethnographic tradition in prison research. The ethnographies included in this section featured ongoing relations between researchers, the research setting and the individuals studied, and the researchers frequently immersed themselves in the field and examined subjective experiences. By way of contrast, as a survey researcher, I primarily collected data using a survey instrument and engaged in more limited contacts with respondents. Similar to Jenness (2010), I did not conduct an actual ethnography in the traditional sense. However, also similar to Jenness, I gained ethnographic insights and engaged in reflective inquiry in the process of carrying out my survey research. I now turn to the interviewing dynamics and research settings that shaped my day-to-day experiences in the field.

(A) Typical day of interviewing in prison

My trips to prison featured the pervading sense of never having enough time. On most days, institutions provided me a maximum of two and a half hours to conduct two interviews. My meetings with prisoners had to be structured around meals, programming, recreation, multiple inmate counts, visitation, and other routine activities, which unfortunately left few open timeslots for interviewing.

Interviews took an average of one to one and a half hours to complete, which, depending on the day, left little to no time for delays. Human Subjects protections required that I interview respondents in a private room with no staff or other inmates present, and I used a laptop computer to administer self-report surveys. Unfortunately, the time it took to find a private room and set up my equipment regularly cut into my interviewing period. I elaborate more on day-to-day challenges in the following paragraphs.

There were many days when I arrived and learned the paperwork had not been submitted for my gate pass. On other occasions the wrong name or incorrect interviewing times were listed. These errors were usually remedied with a call to an administrator, though there were a few days when I was denied access and had to go home without ever entering the prison. Getting through security in a timely manner, finding staff who had been assigned to escort³ me to my interviewing room, and contacting inmates for their interviews were difficulties faced throughout the time I was in the field.

A new host of challenges was often presented once entrance to the prison was gained. For instance, I often showed up and learned that respondents were in the administrative segregation unit for disciplinary reasons. Other times inmates had been transferred to another institution, were temporarily away for court, or had been released from prison early. There was even an instance where a respondent escaped before his interview could be conducted.

Additional unexpected challenges emerged from my equipment. During the first wave of interviewing, there was a day when a frayed power chord caused the computer to suddenly die while I was conducting an interview. On another occasion the computer lost its charge and shut down because, unbeknownst to me, the outlets in my interviewing room had been disconnected from their power source for a remodeling project. While equipment failures are not limited to prison research, they pose unique challenges in prison settings.

For instance, minor problems can result in canceled interviews due to time constraints. Moreover, computer illiterate respondents may get confused or become frustrated when their responses disappear from the computer screen, and some may equate equipment failure with being unprofessional. Finally, inmates and staff alike may become suspicious of prolonged fidgeting with equipment and similar makeshift efforts to address technological difficulties.

Some prisoners may associate equipment failures with carelessness. In dehumanizing prison environments, a researcher's perceived lack of preparation may be interpreted as a lack of regard for the inmate and his time. Unforeseen equipment failures, therefore have the potential to break the trust that is essential when carrying out research in prison.

Interview settings varied across institutions and from one day to the next. I typically met with respondents in unoccupied staff offices, classrooms, parole-board rooms, visiting rooms, and conference rooms. Sometimes these settings were comfortable and conducive to interviewing. Other times they featured uncomfortable conditions such as no air conditioning on hot and humid summer days, excessive noise, poor lighting, and large windows that created a fishbowl dynamic.

A typical day of interviewing in prison was unpredictable and often frustrating (Rhodes 2009). Getting stalled at the front desk, having to wait for tardy inmates, dealing with equipment problems, and contending with other unpredictable

³ Each of the prisons I interviewed in required me to be escorted to the interviewing room by prison staff.

challenges and distractions cut into the limited window of time that was available to conduct interviews (Waldrum 2009). Unanticipated incidents often muddled a day's interviewing schedule and prolonged the project's time in the field. Cannell and Kahn (1968:575) noted the need for researchers to be spontaneous when conducting interviews. This is especially true when interviewing in prisons (Martin 2000).

Impacting the Setting

Qualitative researchers have noted that studying inmates interferes with the daily activities of prisons (Hart 1995; King 2000; Martin 2000; Newman 1958). Taking up office space was a fundamental way that my presence impacted the prison environment. There was one time when I overheard staff members in an adjacent room complaining to a corrections officer that my respondents had been waiting in their area for over two hours, yet I had been monitoring the area and knew the inmates had been there no longer than five minutes. These complaints seemed to be territorially motivated and served as a reminder that my presence was not always welcomed.

Some staff members were frank in expressing resentment toward my presence, but these reactions were not representative of how most prison employees responded. Many staff members seemed indifferent to my presence, while others took an active interest in the project and eagerly tried to help. For instance, correctional officers offered to give me tours of their institutions so I could learn more about prisons, and front desk officers were my best allies when paperwork was not submitted and improvised plans for my entrance were needed.

Inmates' reactions also provided insight into my effects on the setting. Many respondents were thankful for the chance to interact with someone who was not another prisoner or staff member (Copes and Hochstetler 2006; Rhodes 2009), and some inmates perceived participating in the project as a chance to give voice to their experiences. Several respondents felt important because someone from a well-known university drove all the way to the institution just to talk with them. In general, my presence seemed to be viewed favorably. The main negative effect I had on inmates was that sometimes they were woken up or taken away from an activity to be interviewed.

Peripheral and Invisible

Accommodating researchers is not a primary concern of most prisons (Hart 1995). Helping me was one of several responsibilities that staff members faced each day. The frequencies in which gate passes were not prepared, escorts were not lined up, respondents had not received passes⁴, and prisons had not been expecting me suggested my presence was more of a nuisance than a priority.

Subtle reminders that I was not the featured attraction in the prison environment checked any proclivity I had toward egocentrism. For instance, I once interviewed an inmate in a setting that had an adjoining toilet. A staff member entered the room at one point and walked by oblivious to the interview that was taking place. He loudly

⁴ Interview schedules were lined up with prison administrators at the beginning of each interviewing wave. The research protocol then called for prison staff to complete passes prior to each interview. Respondents were prevented from coming for their interviews unless they had a pass that allowed them to move about the institution.

urinated and then left. There were also times when employees forgot to escort me from the interviewing room back to the prison's entrance when my time was up.

Prisons are large formal bureaucracies. Each day volunteers, lawyers, vendors, teachers, and other visitors pass through their gates. In the flurry of activity, I was sometimes overlooked or ignored. While my presence clearly impacted the research setting at times, emphasizing my effects on the prison environment would be self-indulgent because I was occasionally invisible and always peripheral.

Inmate-Staff Tension

Researchers who spend time in correctional institutions will inevitably find themselves in the middle of tense interactions. Prisoners were typically cooperative and agreeable toward me and during interviews. However, some behaved disrespectfully toward staff for no apparent reason. Similarly, some prison employees appeared boorish when interacting with inmates, yet most of these individuals were pleasant and considerate with me.

It is possible dynamics I did not see produced the inconsistent behaviors I observed. What I perceived as arbitrary treatment by staff or unprovoked attitude by inmates may have in fact been rooted in ongoing relational patterns. Alternatively, situational features of prison environments may have given rise to these behaviors, independent of the persons involved (Goffman 1964). Conclusions about inmate and staff behavior would be dubious given the contradictory patterns exhibited and limits on what I saw. These observations must therefore be interpreted with caution because behavior occurs within broader contexts and may be guided by complex or unobservable forces.

The Presentation of Self

Employees in total institutions often separate themselves and prisoners into us/them dichotomies that reduce inmates to managed objects (Goffman 1961). These divisions between staff members and prisoners are often reinforced by inmate codes of conduct that forbid inmates from engaging in friendly relations with staff (Granack 2000; Sykes 1958; Sykes and Messinger 1960). Within the dichotomized prison world, researchers represent a third category that falls outside the inmate-staff social order (King 2000). Occupying this position allowed me to gain insights that might have otherwise been unavailable had either 'us' believed I was aligned with 'them.' Neutrality and maintaining outsider status can therefore be beneficial when conducting research in prison, but when this is not possible researchers should consider embracing their "multiple loyalties" to prisoners and staff as situations dictate (Nielsen 2010).

Doing research in correctional settings requires assistance and cooperation from prisoners and employees (Newman 1958; Rhodes 2009). I found that managing these dependencies entailed balancing and putting forth an objective front. Following King's (2000) advice, I presented myself as being committed to learning about prisoners rather than as an advocate for inmates or employees. Aside from being a truthful representation of my motives, this response satisfied staff members who asked why I was interviewing prisoners.

Newman (1958) suggested researchers should stress to inmates that they are not affiliated with the prison system in any way. Moreover, King (2000) recommended

that researchers engage in visible actions that substantiate their outsider status, such as being seen waiting for escorts from employees when entering and leaving the setting (Waldrum 2009). Both of these tactics were incorporated into my presentations of self.

The way I introduced myself in prison was also crucial and was not taken for granted. Prisoners and non-prisoners alike often incorrectly assume that criminologists are affiliated with law enforcement agencies and that sociologists are either social workers or activists. Most prisoners would have therefore been suspicious of my motives had I presented myself in the prison environment as a 'criminologist,' and both staff and inmates would have potentially misunderstood my objectives had I presented myself as a 'sociologist.' Accordingly, I introduced myself as a 'university researcher' because this title was most accurate and least likely to be misconstrued.

Being connected with a well-known university increases the likelihood of being taken seriously by administrators, line staff, and inmates (Jacobs 1977; King 2000; Martin 2000; Newman 1958). For instance, many staff members and inmates were devoted fans of my university's football team, which was not surprising considering that prisons are hyper-masculine environments (Sabo, Kupers and London 2001) and football is a hyper-masculine activity (Messner 2002). Several inmates said they participated in the study because they loved our team. Aside from football, some staff members were alumni, some inmates had hopes of attending the University in the future, and both staff and inmates knew people who were enrolled at the University. Several respondents said they volunteered because they had a family member or friend who attended the University. In some instances favorable reactions from those encountered in the field were likely elicited through the power that comes with having a university affiliation. Yet, as the preceding examples show a genuine respect for the university itself, this often motivated inmates and staff to assist in my research.

From presentation of self to self reflection

Up to this point I have shared challenges often encountered in the field and described how I presented myself and impacted the setting. My goal has been to offer a prelude to situations others might face when doing their own research. Clarke (1975) proposed that sociologists should examine how research affects the researcher as opposed to just focusing on its effects on the researched. Accordingly, I now take an introspective turn toward personal reflections on doing research in prison and their potential implications.

Toward Reflective Quantitative Research

Individuals who spend time in penal institutions typically have a range of strong reactions to prison environments. For instance, the word 'adrenaline' has been used to describe the rush of being a new correctional officer (Conover 2000) and teacher in prison (Gordon 2000:xix), while prison chaplains have been found to experience tension and identity shifts when reconciling their clergy and prison staff roles (Hicks 2008). A journalist recently disclosed experiencing utter sadness when observing incarcerated juveniles (Hubner 2005). Likewise, volunteers in an adult prison in Washington state (Gabriel 2005) and a juvenile hall in Los Angeles County (Salzman 2003) unexpectedly bonded with inmates and chose to renew their initial

assignments. Most notably over the years, inmates have expressed frustration and myriad other reactions to being locked up and the conditions of confinement (Abbott 1981; Hassine 1999; Martin and Sussman 2002; Rideau and Wikberg 1992; Santos 2003; Zehr 1996).

Taken together, these selected examples suggest that prisons profoundly affect those who enter them. Accordingly, it is peculiar that quantitative researchers have avoided writing about their own experiences in correctional settings (Liebling 1999), especially when considering self-report surveys have been administered in prisons for several decades. Whereas qualitative researchers have frequently reported being moved and personally affected by prison environments (Davies 2000; Fisher-Giorlando 2003; Jacobs 1977; King 2000; Pryor 1996). My review of the literature produced only one article that examined the effects of prison environments on individuals who conducted quantitative research (Liebling 1999).

Survey researchers are painstakingly thorough when describing their variables, equation models, and statistical analyses. Yet, reflective sections are typically absent from quantitative works (Ryan and Golden 2006). Some quantitative researchers may deflect attention from the data collection process and their own experiences to mask flaws in their research designs. In many other instances these omissions stem from the use of secondary data, although, even those who do their own surveys rarely provide reflection in their published works. These omissions tacitly imply that survey research and survey researchers are objective and detached from emotion. This is unlikely, particularly for those who study prisons (Liebling 1999).

If quantitative researchers do in fact experience emotions while doing research, why do they avoid sharing them? I propose that one reason quantitative researchers do not write more reflectively is because they believe this is what qualitative researchers do. Researchers need to transcend qualitative/quantitative divisions when conceptualizing their methods. Silverman correctly pointed out that “most dichotomies or polarities in social science are highly dangerous. At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain a first grip on a difficult field: they help us to learn the jargon. At worst, they are excuses for not thinking” (1998:80). To the extent reflective work is considered the exclusive domain of qualitative researchers, simplistic quantitative/qualitative dichotomies will continue to be reinforced and invaluable insights from quantitative research will go unshared.

Entering a correctional facility is a sensory experience (Liebling 1999; Wacquant 2002), and qualitative researchers have convincingly demonstrated that emotions can serve as an additional source of knowledge (Nielsen 2010). Despite the fact that quantitative researchers have not given voice to this feature of the research process, others should be forewarned that doing survey research in prison is likely to affect them personally. They should therefore regard their emotions as key sources of insight into prisons and the research process. Toward this end, I present a sample of my own reactions below, and I then outline four implications for other prison researchers.

Interviewing in Total Institutions

“The prisons we inherit are settings of pain” (Johnson 2002:60), because incarceration deprives inmates of privacy, agency, intimate relations, and feelings of safety (Sykes 1958). Within total institutions, inmates’ daily lives are dictated by social controls that ultimately foster their subservience and estrangement from broader society (Goffman 1961). The following summaries of my research notes

affirm that deprivation and pain were acutely experienced by many of the prisoners I interviewed:

- Respondents spoke of difficulties stemming from being surrounded by criminals, being disrespected by staff, not having any privacy, boredom, being away from family, losing partners and homes, and having loved ones die while in prison. Irwin (1985) noted it is hard to maintain a decent appearance while in jail. Several respondents I spoke with looked unkempt and disheveled, suggesting similar difficulties exist in prison. I also saw countless sores, rashes, and other skin conditions, and I interviewed a few inmates with marks resembling cutting scars on their arms.
- Goffman (1961) depicted total institutions as places where inmates are openly mocked by staff and talked about like they are not present while they are physically in the setting. I observed both of these dynamics often. I also witnessed strip-searches of inmates on a handful of occasions. Strip-searching prisoners in front of a university researcher reveals the salience and shamelessness of the objectification of inmates in the prison environment.
- Imprisonment led some inmates to become completely detached from their support systems. For instance, a respondent from another state happened to get arrested while passing through the region. His impoverished family lived in his home state hundreds of miles away from where he was serving his time. I was, therefore, his only visitor while he had been incarcerated. This respondent described being lonely in prison and asked me to come back again in the future.

In many cases affliction was apparent simply from looking at inmates. My own observations of distress made interviewing challenging at times. Seeing the dehumanization of inmates in prison and additional problems often posed by incarceration made me feel powerless. Other reactions I had include sorrow, chagrin, and anger:

- Respondents frequently revealed painful backgrounds containing addictions, overdoses, victimization, stigmatization, unemployment, relationship and family problems, illiteracy, and poverty. I often wondered how and if they would overcome the obstacles they faced. I concluded many would not. These realizations left me sad.
- Prisoners sometimes say offensive things during interviews (Davies 2000). I spoke with inmates who made sexist comments and were self-proclaimed racists. I also encountered prisoners and staff members who made homophobic jokes. Some respondents committed acts I personally detest. Staff members were also offensive at times. Observing prideful expressions of these ideologies and behaviors by individuals who had helped me was both disappointing and awkward.
- Fleisher (1998) became outraged at the criminal justice system when seeing how it negatively affected the gang members he studied. I was angered by observations of how incarceration isolated and disrupted lives, stigmatized offenders, and often presented new challenges to people who already faced insurmountable problems.

I was also frustrated at times because some respondents should not have been sent to prison in my opinion. For instance, I interviewed individuals who were locked up for what I considered to be minor drug offenses. Given the potential harmful effects of incarceration (Elsner 2006), the average annual cost of over \$20,000 to incarcerate prisoners in the institutions I visited, and the increasingly high recidivism rates of drug offenders (Hughes and Wilson 2002), I often questioned the wisdom of using prison to sanction addiction.

Doing survey research in prison clearly exposes researchers to bothersome situations. However, within the negative ambience of correctional settings there are also auspicious circumstances. For instance, I observed positive moments resulting from rehabilitative programming:

- Some respondents sought to make changes in their lives and were pleased to have access to parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, and GED programs. One respondent completed his GED while incarcerated and then became a tutor for other prisoners. He exuded pride and planned to enter college upon his release. Emphases on high recidivism rates and other failures of the prison system typically overshadow the success stories (Johnson 2002; Maruna 2001). A substantial minority of the inmates I interviewed told me their lives were out of control and that coming to prison had been good for them. These revelations surprised me.

- A few of the prisons had dog-training programs. Cell dogs seemed to have a pacifying effect on prison environments and immediately attracted attention in any room they entered. One day an inmate stopped by the interviewing room to introduce me to his cell dog. It was hot and humid throughout the institution, and the dog sullenly resisted leaving the comfort of the air-conditioned office when it was time for him to go. His inmate handler, a correctional officer, and I temporarily bonded in an empathic moment.

The word 'prison' often conjures up images of oppression and monotony. My observations do not refute these connotations, though my year in the field suggests that prison environments are more complex. I found that many deprivations and pains experienced by prisoners are veiled and not readily apparent to outsiders. I also saw evidence suggesting that prisons sometimes improve the lives of those they lock up. I have provided a sample of my reflections to give other researchers a sense of what doing research in prison is like on an experiential level.

Implications

I now will examine four implications that can be drawn from my reflections. First, those who do research in prison must carefully consider how they will present themselves in the field. I recommend adopting neutral fronts to avoid being assigned a position within inmate and staff us/them dichotomies and making deliberate efforts to sustain an image as one who is not of the prison or the prisoners.

Future researchers should expect to engage in emotion management (Hochschild 1983; Nielsen 2010). For instance, there were times when I was frustrated by prison policies, angered by the actions of corrections officers, annoyed by inmates, and sympathetic to those who were incarcerated. I also met inmates and

staff members with whom I likely could have established friendships had we met under different circumstances. Regardless of how I felt, I kept my opinions and emotions to myself to ensure that neither prisoners nor staff had reason to associate me with 'them.' I also chose to contain my reactions when experiencing negative emotions and encountering language and behavior I found offensive.

A second implication for future researchers pertains to guarding against selective perceptions. When spending consecutive days in the field, it often seemed like the main people I spoke to each week were the prisoners and staff members I encountered while interviewing. Researchers may become susceptible to prison-tunnel vision when their prison-related interactions rival or exceed their interactions with free-society in frequency, duration, or intensity. Researchers must therefore critically examine the perceptions they take away from prison and maintain broader perspectives.

For instance, I previously referenced my chagrin when inmates and staff expressed offensive sentiments. It is important to remember that people who do not live or work in prison often hold similar beliefs. Asserting that people in prison are sexist, racist, and homophobic without also acknowledging the prevalence of these ideologies in mainstream society would therefore be skewed. I also made reference to a subset of respondents who spoke of making improvements in their lives while incarcerated. However, this does not necessarily mean that these inmates wanted to be in prison. The extent to which some inmates expressed being positively affected by imprisonment likely reflects how uncomfortable their lives were prior to prison rather than the comforts and desirability of prison life *per se* (see Ross and Richards 2002 for a thorough review of the discomforts of prison).

Researchers should also critically assess perceptions they take into prison. I spoke of my surprise upon observing prison success stories, which indicates that I mainly expected to find inmate resentment and evidence of failed prison policies. These presumptions were likely formed through living in a society that is becoming increasingly critical of its prisons, my exposure to media images that sensationalize pain, and my readings of academic works geared toward identifying and fixing the many problems that currently plague the justice system. Researchers need to place their observations and interactions into proper context to avoid unfair or incomplete generalizations and erroneous conclusions.

The third implication I examine pertains to research ethics. The Belmont Report outlines basic ethical principles for researchers in the United States, including the need for prisoners to be capable of making informed decisions that are free from "undue inducements" when they are recruited as research subjects (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1978; Kiefer 2004; Martin 2000; Overholser 1987). I referred to a respondent from another state that had not had any visitors and asked me to come back. Of all the interviews I conducted, his affected me most. Aside from feeling sympathetic, I later wondered whether loneliness constitutes an undue inducement to participate in a prisoner study. I am not sure and I continue to reflect on this conundrum. I believe others who do research with prisoners must also carefully weigh this concern. In the interim, I turn to the fact that I treated the respondent with respect and temporarily relieved him from his isolation.

A fourth implication for researchers involves power and objectification. My reactions and observations reflect my privileged positions as researcher and temporary guest in the prison environment. They may also hint at voyeurism. Jacobs (1977) questioned whether sidestepping inmates' pain to focus on his research goals was voyeuristic and pondered whether prison research should be done. I believe it should.

Increases in the United States' prison population over the past few decades have been unprecedented (Austin and Irwin 2001; Elsner 2006) and recidivism rates have been rising (Hughes and Wilson 2002). Yet, as these trends have become more pronounced, there has been an unfortunate decline in ethnographic prison studies relative to previous eras (Rhodes 2001; Wacquant 2002). Moreover, though prisons are fascinating places (King 2000), most people have misconceptions of what they are like (King 2000; Martin 2000). For instance, correctional officers and prisoners are often negatively stereotyped, yet they were mostly accommodating and helpful toward me (Liebling 1999). Research on prisons and prisoners should therefore be conducted to shed light on assumptions that are taken for granted and encourage wider dialogue on prison-related topics.

However, researchers must constantly and critically evaluate their motivations for studying prisoners. There are an infinite number of potential research topics one can pursue. I chose to interview prisoners, and the experience was captivating. Charges of voyeurism are therefore difficult to deny. I instead propose conceptualizing voyeurism as a continuum featuring the ideal types of exploitative voyeurism at one end and sympathetic voyeurism at the other. Researchers should be reflective and regularly determine where they fit on this voyeurism continuum. Those with exploitative leanings should consider pulling out of the field or revising their agendas.

Concerns about recent shifts in corrections and the fates of people in prison drove my initial participation in this project. Through ongoing reflections on my involvement and discussions with colleagues I consistently reaffirmed that my motivations were mostly sympathetic rather than exploitative. I also determined the project had more positive than negative implications for prisons and inmates, and I would have terminated my involvement had I concluded otherwise. Ideally, my research will contribute to the betterment of offenders' lives and the formulation of policies that reduce crime and recidivism. Regardless, I listened and treated inmates and staff with respect in an environment where dignity can be hard to come by (Waldram 2009).

Recapitulated themes: suggestions for students and others

I have described the day-to-day process of doing survey research in prison. I have also shared personal reflections. These observations and reflections are intended to generate deliberation on doing research in prison and to provide beginning researchers with a starting point. Several implications have already been stated, while others have been subtly implied. I conclude with the following list of suggestions to efficiently summarize my tips for those planning to survey prisoners (King and Liebling 2007 for a list of additional suggestions):

1. Learn as much as you can about prisons, prisoners, prison employees, crime, research methods, your survey instrument, and your particular research setting.
2. Expect the unexpected, be flexible, and establish contingency plans to deal with the potential challenges you are able to identify ahead of time.
3. Establish a contact person amongst the line staff each day to provide you with logistical assistance. The administrators who initially helped you gain access to the institution(s) will likely be inaccessible when you need help with day-to-day challenges.

4. Know and recognize your place. Prisons are large formal organizations responsible for maintaining institutional security and delivering services to hundreds of people on a daily basis. Though your research may be central to your life, it is not an institutional priority. Having to help you represents one more task for staff members who may feel overworked or under-appreciated. Assume your presence is a nuisance and tread respectfully.
5. Remember that formal organizations feature diffusions of responsibility and bureaucratized divisions of labor that sometimes create inconveniences and complicate efforts to remedy seemingly minor problems.
6. Be patient and polite; and avoid engaging in behavior that could be perceived as rude or indicative of entitlement.⁵
7. Take deliberate efforts to avoid being assigned a place in the inmate-staff dichotomy. You will find yourself in the middle of inmate-staff tensions. Contemplate and assess your presentations of self regularly, and remember that nearly all of your actions, words, and demeanors will be visible and possibly scrutinized by inmates and staff.
8. Introduce yourself as a 'researcher' rather than a 'criminologist' or 'sociologist.' If you have a university affiliation be sure to embrace it.
9. Expect that people will be curious about what you are doing and eager to ask you questions. Come up with ways to deflect the attention of those who are "too" curious.
10. Expect that other people will ignore you and be indifferent to your presence and dilemmas.
11. In general, expect a lot of kindness and a little rudeness.
12. Be sure to maintain broader perspectives, guard against selective perceptions, and pay attention to your emotional reactions. Moreover, recognize that you will experience a broad range of emotions and reactions, which will likely require you to engage in emotional management.
13. Critically, honestly, and regularly contemplate the ethics of what you are doing.
14. Critically, honestly, and regularly consider where you land on the sympathetic-exploitative voyeurism continuum.
15. Remember that interviewing is a social activity (Cannell and Kahn 1968; Jenkins 1995; Suchman and Jordan 1990).
16. Be reflective. Qualitative researchers have developed good habits when it comes to reflective inquiry. Most survey researchers have not (or if they have they have kept them to themselves). When doing survey research transcend the qualitative-quantitative divides to make your own work more dynamic.
17. Plan to learn more than you had envisioned. Anticipate the likelihood that your survey instrument may not capture your most compelling observations and devise a strategy for cataloging and channeling what cannot be quantified.

Final thoughts

In the preceding sections I have called on quantitative researchers to reflect on research settings and the research process more explicitly in their studies. Survey researchers regularly neglect writing about research settings and the data collection process in their scholarly publications. Their conventional practice of only focusing on

⁵ Though seemingly obvious, stories I heard about other researchers who were disrespectful suggest this needs to be said.

data analyses and empirical findings is detrimental because aspiring survey researchers are left to navigate prison settings and resolve emergent challenges without the benefit of knowing how others accomplished these tasks. This flagrant shortcoming in our discipline undermines efforts toward the ideal of sociology as a collective and cumulative social science.

My own background and my interactions with colleagues have taught me that others who are contemplating doing research with prisoners typically have two questions. First, they wonder what it is like to do research in prison. I have addressed this question by elaborating on my day-to-day experiences in the field and sharing a sample of personal reflections. Second, they want to know how to maximize the likelihood that their data collection will go smoothly. I have addressed this question by offering a primer on doing research that includes a list of suggestions derived from my own experiences.

I have attempted to illuminate some of the unknowns that will likely be faced by future scholars who conduct research in prisons. Yet, my experiences may not be representative of what others will encounter. For instance, my research focused on adult males housed in minimum and medium security level institutions in one region of one country. Although there are many similarities across institutional settings, it must be recognized that prison and institutional cultures can vary widely from one facility to the next. Those who study juveniles, female inmates, offenders in higher security prisons, and inmates housed in other correctional systems, regions, and nations will therefore undoubtedly confront their own unique challenges. Future researchers should regard this article as a beginning point rather than an exhaustive or authoritative collection of guidelines. Moreover, it should be remembered that while I provide an ethnographic account I did not conduct a traditional ethnography involving prolonged immersion and active participation in the research setting.

An unanticipated challenge of writing this article has been sharing potentially unflattering observations about the prisons, inmates, and staff members who accommodated me. I am reminded of King's (2000) suggestion that researchers be committed to learning about prisoners rather than advocating on behalf of inmates and employees. I have attempted to remain fair, and I hope my efforts to eliminate sensationalism in the presentation of my observations, reactions, opinions, and suggestions have been successful.

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