What has prison ethnography to offer in an age of mass incarceration?

Yvonne Jewkes considers the importance of research in understanding the prison

The 'eclipse' of prison ethnography may have been exaggerated, but there can be little doubt that in many countries ethnographic studies are overshadowed by a heavily quantitative approach to penology. It is little wonder that, in an age of mass incarceration, the temptation is to focus on the big numbers – of prisoners incarcerated, levels of mental illness and drug dependency, suicide rates, children left without a parent, recidivism, individuals dependent on the prison-industrial complex for their livelihood, and so many more. However, the bald statistics conceal complex lives and important stories and, as this article will argue, if prison researchers embrace the 'reflexive turn' in qualitative sociology and acknowledge the emotion and humanity inherent in the ethnographic research process we can enrich our work and deepen our understanding of the people and contexts we study without compromising our ability to effectively critique penal systems. In what follows I will briefly outline four key reasons why I believe ethnography remains vital to understanding the prison.

1. Numbers can dazzle and desensitise

The idea of dazzle as desensitisation and deception stems from the camouflage used to paint battleships in the two World Wars. Dazzle painting (or 'razzle dazzle') might seem an unlikely form of camouflage, but the technique was developed not to conceal the vessel but to confuse the enemy naval artilleries' visual rangefinders, making it difficult for them to estimate the ship's type, size, speed and heading. In recent years, organisation theorists have borrowed the 'dazzle' analogy, arguing that buildings can also dazzle with their sheer aesthetic brilliance, inducing a seemingly paradoxical *anaesthetising* effect, dulling or deadening the senses of those who occupy them or gaze upon them (Dale and Burrell, 2003).

Prison statistics can similarly 'dazzle' and anaesthetise. California, the US's largest state prison system, provides an example. Since 2009 when its prisons housed more than 160,000 prisoners and employed over 69,000 personnel, at an annual cost of $10.3 billion, California has twice been subject to court orders requiring it to cut its prison population by tens of thousands (Hartnett et al., 2011). These almost incomprehensible numbers make it more vital than ever that social scientists go beyond abstraction and describe the lived experience of imprisonment, the felt effects of which can only be understood ethnographically.

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2. Ethnography implies engagement

Accounting for what it means to be human in carceral environments allows prison ethnographers to occupy the 'critical' intellectual space between theory and politics, but go further than many critical criminologists, who may be among the most vociferous and passionate critics of prisons, but sometimes have not conducted research in prisons (or not for many years) and can appear curiously detached from the people most affected by the structural and systemic imbalances they are concerned with. In particular, a radical, abolitionist stance sometimes precludes its advocates from highlighting much that is positive or progressive within the penal system; for example, about successful individual prison communities, pioneering penal 'experiments', individual acts of positive resistance, or about enlightened governors trying to change the system from within. It is as if to illuminate pockets of good practice or individual agency, however small, would undermine their overarching message, which is that prisons are 'places of sadness and terror, harm and injustice, secrecy and oppression' (Scott and Codd, 2012).

In my experience prisons are complex and multi-dimensional. Yes, they can be all of the above but they can also be, sometimes simultaneously, places of great humour and playfulness, of friendship and camaraderie, of educational enlightenment, of successful therapeutic intervention. French philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984) characterises all social relations as being a conflict between the 'strategies' of the powerful – who are cumbersome, unimaginative and bureaucratic – and the 'tactics' of the weak – who are, by contrast, 'nimble, creative and flexible'. Critical criminology tells us that penal institutions constitute one of the places where the powerful construct and exercise their power, and there are of course good reasons why criminologists emphasise the most tragic aspects of incarceration, but it

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is important to acknowledge that the 'weak' create their own spaces within those places, making them temporarily their own as they occupy and move through them.

3. Ethnography permits the researcher to write themselves into the narrative

Criminology has largely resisted the notion that qualitative inquiry has auto-ethnographic dimensions and has remained quiet on the subject of the emotional investment required of ethnographic fieldworkers studying people confined in prison. But in failing to disclose these roles in, and responses to, what are frequently challenging and highly charged emotional environments, prison scholars are arguably doing a disservice to those who follow them (e.g. PhD students) who frequently approach the field with high levels of anxiety. In comparison to many other fields of scholarly interest, prisons generate a high degree of curiosity for those whose only knowledge is gained through popular media representations, and many novice prison researchers not only want to 'know' and 'understand' but also want to anticipate how they will 'feel' when they experience a prison environment for the first time.

There have been few attempts to account for why we do research, what our conscious or unconscious motivations might be, and how we feel both while carrying out the research and afterwards. It is as if fear of exposure as an emotional human being, capable of compassion and empathy with respondents or, indeed, excitement about the research process will undermine our findings or create what appears as 'soft' research. The fact that most of those texts which disclose feelings and emotions about the research experience are written by women sometimes causes them to be problematically constructed as '(stereo)typically' female texts. But if we can succeed in retaining epistemological and theoretical rigor while at the same time 'owning up' to feelings of emotional investment, we arguably produce more interesting and honest knowledge which provides a benchmark for others trying to process their experiences about the research they undertake (see Jewkes, 2012, for a more detailed discussion).

4. Resisting the audit culture and the ubiquity of prison psychology

In an era of mass incarceration, prison ethnography is an important counter to the 'official' audit culture that has led to prisons being judged on a plethora of government instigated rules, directives and performance targets, which have commensurably rendered individual prisoners anonymous, dehumanised, administrative targets. Additionally, recent decades have witnessed the dominance of the empiricist, 'scientific' methods and the findings of psychologists. The emergence of clinical programmes aimed at treating offenders' behaviour has resulted in prison psychologists being awarded an unprecedented level of power, including power over access to prisons by academic researchers. Government departments have further discouraged ethnographers with a variety of strategies questioning the methodology, objectivity and usefulness of sociologically imaginative studies of the internal life of the prison. If this were not potentially obstructive enough, the prison service's demands for researchers to disclose information concerning inmate behaviour that breaks prison rules and can be adjudicated against, including illegal acts, and behaviour that is harmful to the research participant (e.g. intention to self-harm or complete suicide), conflicts with most university ethics committees' requirement that the researcher guarantees participant confidentiality. The demand that researchers within prisons will be expected to 'submit any questionnaires or interview schedules in advance for clearance' further obstructs ethnographers whose aims are to see what questions emerge while in the field. These obstacles to qualitative prison research are not insurmountable but they are certainly challenging – and must be resisted if prisons and prisoners are not to be consigned to the deepest recess of knowledge and understanding.

Conclusion

The Open University ICCCR conference that precipitated this issue of **cjm** robustly contested the notion that we have witnessed an eclipse of prison ethnography. It brought together a wide range of researchers from numerous countries doing important, insightful ethnographies on an impressive range of topics. But to offer one final thought: if prison ethnography is confronting challenges in the face of desensitising statistics, theoretical orthodoxies, antipathy to acknowledging a human connection between researcher and respondent, and an official aversion to sociologically imaginative scholarship, how much more hidden are the voices – and for that matter the faces and bodies – of those detained in immigration detention centres? Important work is certainly being undertaken across several disciplines, including criminology, but it's an emergent field. So, looking to the future, a robust and emotionally attuned ethnography of detention in the broadest sense may be urgently required in an age of mass 'crimmigration'. ■

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