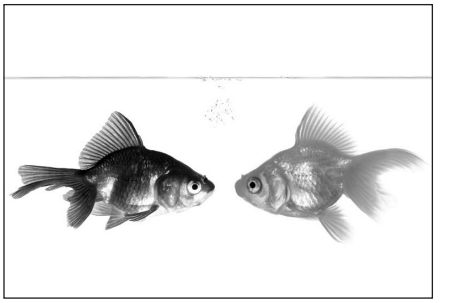
Emotional engagements: on sinking and swimming in prison research and ethnography



Jennifer Sloan and **Deborah H Drake**

consider the importance of processing the emotional dimensions of prisons research

Undertaking in-depth, ethnographic research in prisons requires significant amounts of practical and emotional commitment. By entering the prison world, researchers are able to see a world that few others gain access to, listen to stories that are rarely heard, and ask questions that many are interested in. Whilst prison researchers might be considered 'privileged' in the sense that they gain access to places that are closed off from most members of the public, there is another side to the experience of prison research that is often left under-explored: the emotional trials and costs that can accompany 'deep end' research within the confines of the prison world. This article considers some of the emotional dimensions and challenges of prison research, arguing that, whilst it is uncomfortable and exposing for researchers to examine the emotional dimensions of research, analysis of the role emotions can play has been under-examined in prison studies, despite their importance to the research process (Yuen, 2011). We suggest that knowledge and understanding about prison life and the lived experience of imprisonment can be deepened and enriched when researchers identify and systematically process their emotions as a form of data.

The negative effects of research

It is rare for prisons researchers to explicitly discuss the negative effects of doing in-depth research, particularly when surrounded by people who live and work in prisons and who have crucial narratives to share that can be key to understanding the weight, depth and scope of penal developments. To talk of the effects that research has on a researcher – who has freely chosen to enter the prison setting and can leave at any time – may seem self-indulgent, irrelevant to the production of knowledge, and can be thought to betray inexperience or ineffectiveness as a researcher. Crewe (2009) has stated his unwillingness to give focussed attention to himself in his analysis of the prisoner society, 'because my identity was not what the study was about'. By contrast, Phillips and Earle argue 'a study of prisoner identities could not be divorced from some reflection on our own identities' (2010). Due to a tradition of relative silence amongst researchers on the experience of undertaking in-depth ethnographic work in prisons, there is a gap in the methods literature on what to expect when carrying out research in the field and thus researchers have little guidance on how to process and utilise their emotional experiences (see Jewkes, 2012). A growing body of literature outside of prison studies persuasively argues that reflexivity and emotionally-sensed data can offer key insights about a given phenomenon or area of study that is difficult to access through other data sources (Davidson et al., 2005).

To explore the importance of emotion in prison studies, we examine two examples from our own research histories. Whilst undertaking her PhD research in a men's Category C prison, Jennifer Sloan's role and experience as a researcher was often infused with notions of risk. She was frequently reminded about protecting her privacy and the potentially manipulative nature of prisoners. However, until she began to process the emotional aspects of her research experiences systematically through the analysis of her research diaries, the full implications of the way 'risk' imbued and distorted the prison environment were not fully clear to her. Research diaries have been recognised as key in the reflexive process, allowing a 'reflexive discussion (with the research team and/or less involved colleagues) of both substantive findings and ongoing field role strategies' (Johnson et al., 1999). By engaging with the way emotional warnings affected her, Sloan came to acknowledge her changing research identity, as well as understand the full weight of the concept of risk in prisons (and aspects of fear in the field, which Liebling discusses in this issue). By engaging with and systematically processing the emotional dimensions of her research experiences, Sloan gained

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understanding, on a very personal level, of the way risk was utilised and how it served to emphasise the negative implications of imprisonment and encourage a sense of insecurity within the secure.

The second example, taken from Deborah H Drake's experiences, considers the role of the physiological as well as the emotional within the research process. Drake, ordinarily of good health, has experienced a number of physiological symptoms during prison research studies (colds, flus, ulcers, and serious throat and bronchial infections), particularly when conducting research in high security prison settings. In contrast to Sloan's experience, it was not possible for Drake to process the extent to which the physical, emotional, intellectual and the physiological were interacting to produce these various symptoms whilst still in the field. In retrospect and through post-hoc structured analysis undertaken some time after the completion of the field research, there were clear symbolic connections between her fieldwork experiences and these physiological states, correlating with moments during the field work when the absence or suppression of voice of the ethnographer was particularly troubling.

Processing and analysing these experiences, however, added a new level of understanding of the harmful effects that the prison environment can have, including the sense of damage, powerlessness, meaninglessness and voicelessness. Whilst the very limited experience of the researcher *cannot compare* to the all-encompassing pressure and weight of prisoners' experiences or the demands and constraints on prison staff, there is insight to be gained about the prison context and the particular strains of these environments when researchers 'pay attention' to their emotional and physiological states when they enter and work within these environments.

Reflecting on emotional dimensions

By reflecting on the emotional dimensions of research it becomes possible to access hidden insights about both the practice and methods of ethnographic research and about the prison environment. Thus, we suggest that there are two key points that require further and continued attention from prison ethnographers. First, researchers should aim to identify and process what they tacitly experience in the field – either during or after their field work. Secondly, researchers should seek out spaces either through written accounts or formal or informal ethnographers' research networks to collectively discuss, process and analyse the meanings of their research experiences. We make these suggestions not on the basis of self-indulgence or merely to protect the well-being of researchers (though the latter is, of course, important if we are concerned with ethically safe research practices), but on the grounds that by examining the emotional dimensions of research we gain a more nuanced understanding about the inner life of the prison world and the impact it has on those living and working there.

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Whilst prisons research is difficult and at times emotionally, physically and mentally challenging, it can also be compelling. Moreover, it allows a few members of society 'in' to observe, absorb and experience the inner-workings of these closed institutions. Such access is not without its costs, and there is a need to engage with some of the challenges of prison research and to confront the fact that, certainly in a Western punitive neo-liberal context 'prison damages people' (Behan, 2002), regardless of who they are and what they have done, be they prisoners, staff, families, local residents or even researchers, all of whom cope with the strains of prisons in different ways. Perhaps some (albeit limited and temporary) damage to the researcher is a necessary aspect of the research enterprise. It can serve as a means through which we can gain a new level of understanding of the harmfulness of prison environments. We contend that there needs to be spaces and opportunities for researchers to explore the hidden aspects of researcher experiences if we are to achieve a more complete picture of the pressures and strains of prison life. ■

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