

On the inside: prison ethnography around the globe

Deborah H Drake and Rod Earle introduce the articles in the themed section

Situate yourselves as close as you can to the perpetrators of crime and deviance, to the victims, to the agents of social control; put yourselves, as best you can and for as long as you can, inside their lives, inside the lived moments of deviance and crime. You won't experience it nicely, and if the danger and hurt become too much, be glad of it. Because as near as you will ever get, you have found your way inside the humanity of crime and deviance.

(Ferrell and Hamm, 1998)

On 18-19 September, 2012 the International Centre of Comparative Criminological Research (ICCCR) at The Open University hosted its annual conference. The conference was entitled *Resisting the Eclipse: An International Symposium on Prison Ethnography*. This themed section of **cjm** reports on ways to open the closed world of prisons to wider scrutiny.

Ethnography is a research method that places special importance on 'understanding the perspectives of the people under study, and of observing their activities in everyday life' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). It is a method often associated with social anthropology and the study of indigenous cultures. Ethnographers try to produce rich and detailed accounts of people and the social processes they are embedded in. For these reasons it is often employed by educational, health and social sciences researchers in a wide variety of institutional, community and other social contexts.

In 2002, Professor Loïc Wacquant published an article, 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration' in a special issue of the journal *Ethnography*. Wacquant expresses amazement and horror on entering a large US penal institution, and his deep sense of foreboding about what such places mean. With US prison populations booming, he laments the scarcity of ethnographic studies of American jails and prisons. He is troubled to note that at a time when the detailed and sensitive examinations of prisons that ethnographers provide are most urgently needed, as prisons multiply in number and diversify in form, this kind of research appears to be disappearing under the weight of more conventional and profitable 'correctional' research.

Prompted by Wacquant's concern about the importance of prison ethnography, the ICCCR symposium aimed to contrast the relative dearth of this kind of work in the US with another story – one of a vibrant, critical and engaged body of prison research around the world. It sought to create a space in which researchers undertaking this work could openly discuss the difficulties, possibilities and complexities associated with prison ethnography, the voices of their informants, and the findings of their detailed studies. The ICCCR conference examined the many different challenges ethnographic researchers face in getting close to the experiences, feelings and understandings of prison life in Africa, South America, India and Europe. By bringing together over 100 delegates from 12 different countries, most with wide

experience of long-term, in-depth research in prisons across the globe the symposium created a unique opportunity to share perspectives.

The articles in this section of **cjm** present some of the issues in prison research discussed by participants at the symposium. The articles explore how prison ethnographers make sense of what they find in prison and consider its wider significance. Prison ethnographers, as Richard Quinney (2000) has argued of criminologists more generally, are given the opportunity to bear witness to experiences and practices that few other members of society have the opportunity to see. And, as a result, they hold a responsibility to communicate and to educate. This issue of **cjm** showcases prison researchers who have resisted the eclipse of prison ethnography and remain committed to exploring and extending its potential.

The growth of seemingly ever-expanding prison systems results in the silencing and invisibilisation of those who do not find a place in society and are forcibly provided with another, hidden from view. In her contribution, **Yvonne Jewkes** examines the 'dazzling' effect of the scale of this growth, suggesting that it not only means ethnographic accounts are more urgently needed but also that ethnographers must attend carefully to other eclipsed or hidden populations detained in the shadowy zones of immigration centres. She advocates the need for an emotionally attuned 'ethnography of confinement' as numbers of prisoners and immigration detainees begin to swell in closed and increasingly secretive institutional environments.

Taking up the visual metaphor that links ethnography to photography, **Lorna Rhodes** aims to widen the vision we have of the prison by offering an examination of what ethnographic accounts of prison life provide in terms of specific and detailed images. Drawing on Roland Barthes' ideas about images and language she pinpoints the importance of detail in ethnography, and the poignancy in both the extraordinary and ordinary moments that are observed by the

ethnographer in the daily life of the prison. These 'telling details' of prison life bring into sharp relief the meaning and essence of prison experiences and offer valuable means for understanding a little of what it really means to be imprisoned or to work in a prison.

Rod Earle summarises in his article the presentation of three papers from the conference that consider how what we know about prison interiors is filtered and shaped by the identity of the researcher. He explores how, while working with Coretta Phillips, around questions of men's ethnicities and social relations in prison, it became clear that their own ethnicity, gender and class mattered, forcing them to reflect more purposively on what this means for prison research. In a second paper, Abigail Rowe presented some richly detailed vignettes from her fieldwork in two women's prisons. They indicate some of the unique qualities of the ethnographic approach. In the third paper summarised here, Martyn Hammersley reveals the long heritage of ethnographic research in social science, and the recurring dilemmas of intimacy with the field and detachment in analysis and commitment to political struggle.

Learning how to 'read' a prison and then, subsequently, how a researcher writes about prison life creates further dilemmas. **Ben Crewe** considers the potentials and difficulties of using detailed life-history interviews with men in prison. Ben contrasts the rich and sometimes troubling detail revealed 'from within the belly of the beast', as Wacquant's article prompted, with the wider analytical challenge: how to connect these dense and delicate webs of affect to the more concrete machinery of the social structure. Grappling with similar issues, **Laura Piacentini** examines some of the interpersonal tools she has developed and utilised to access, cope with and maintain her academic and personal integrity whilst undertaking in-depth research in Russian prisons. She argues that the researcher can engage in meaning-making and knowledge

production even when environmental conditions become hostile or when faced with dilemmas or contradictions in the field. The key, she suggests, is found in the commitment a researcher makes to herself to act with integrity in her research relationships – honouring both the respect she has for her participants and her own academic standards of conduct.

Returning to ideas discussed by Jewkes in the opening article, **Alison Liebling, Jennifer Sloan** and **Deborah H Drake** consider different aspects of the value of reflexivity and how emotionally-sensed data manifests when conducting prison research. **Alison Liebling** reveals a compelling account of recent research in a high security prison which proved emotionally and intellectually taxing. She sets out a brief, but persuasive case for the importance of recognising and systematically processing the ways changes in prison life and penal contexts affect our informants and those working and researching with them. Similarly, Sloan and Drake argue that the emotional and physiological experiences associated with 'deep end' prison research can offer researchers powerful insights. They suggest that emotions can be systematically processed and analysed and that by doing so, deeper insights about the pressures and tensions of the prison world can be identified and discussed.

Chris Garces, Tomas Martin and **Sacha Darke** shift our gaze away from considerations of methodology and research process toward prison studies taking place in Africa and Latin America and the complexities of conducting prison research in the Global South. Their paper implicitly and explicitly challenges the dominance of the Anglo-American axis of prison studies and demonstrates how much there is to be gained by considering the ethnographic work being carried out in prisons outside of the US and the UK. Likewise, **Andrew Jefferson, Mahuya Bandyopadhyay**, and **Thomas Ugelvik's** article illuminates the struggles and tensions thrown up when navigating prison spaces in

India, Norway and 'non-Western spaces' (including Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, Philippines, Jordan, Kosovo and Honduras).

In the final article, **Gilles Chantraine** reflects on the critical potential that ethnographic research in prisons can enlarge. Prison research, he suggests, must escape the prison for if it remains 'prison-centric' it will never fulfil its critical potential. He argues that prisons must always be seen, first and foremost, as the 'flipside of freedom' – one can grow only at the expense of the other. Chantraine urges prison ethnographers to re-draw the starting line of discussions about punishment, calling attention to the 'institutional tyranny' of prison. For Chantraine this tyranny is vulnerable to the challenge of law and he calls for more and more critical, 'ethnographies of the social uses of law in prison'.

Resisting the Eclipse revealed the vitality and diversity of a prison research community. We hope readers of **cjm** will get a sense of both in this themed section and come to share the urgency we feel in our work. ■

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For more details of the Global Prisons Research Network visit: <https://sites.google.com/site/gprnnetwork/>

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