

Writing and reading a prison: making use of prisoner life stories

Ben Crewe considers the value of prisoner life stories as part of an ethnographic approach

In his article, 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography', Loïc Wacquant (2002) makes a specific plea to prison sociologists: they should find ways of getting 'inside the belly of the beast' and then climbing back out again, establishing enough distance from the prison to explain how it is related to other social structures and institutions, such as the labour market, family structures, local neighbourhoods, and welfare services. One aim of doing this is to help us better understand prisoners themselves, Wacquant argues: while it is important to get as close to prisoners as possible, we should avoid methods that are so microscopic that they 'sanitise' or 'glamorise' prisoner behaviour, and fail to explain the broader forms of inequality and life experience which shape their conduct and beliefs.

It is relatively simple to identify the immediate constraints which shape prisoner behaviour i.e. the demands and deprivations of prison life itself. But it is much harder to work out the relationship between the prison and other social institutions, precisely because imprisonment severs the webs that tie them to their families, to the workforce, and to forms of state support and intervention. Meanwhile, the culture of (men's) prisons is such that prisoners themselves tend to hold back anything that suggests weakness or vulnerability, meaning that a researcher who fails to dig beneath the surface of the environment is unlikely to establish much sense of the social and biographical pathways that have brought prisoners into the system.

Wacquant recommends that the best way of contextualising and theorising the prison is to *step back* from it. An alternative, which I have employed in my own research, is to *dig further in*, by conducting a large number of 'life history' interviews with prisoners and trying to integrate the details that emerged from them into my analysis of prison life. I ask prisoners simply to talk me through the details of their life so far. The process of interviewing in this way in itself has a humanising role. Since prisoners are so used to being disbelieved, un-recognised, and un-trusted, listening to their life stories in an active and attentive way is a powerful act. Because imprisonment almost always diminishes their sense of individuality, interviews that ask them who they are *as individuals*, not just as prisoners, communicates that their humanity is being taken seriously.

These stories enable me to write about my participants in a way that feels 'faithful to their understanding of themselves' (Anderson, 2002), while showing the social and cultural pathways that have shaped their attitudes: poverty, multi-generational unemployment, family breakdown, and state intervention, expressed and experienced through such things as sexual abuse, drug addiction, casual violence, and defiance to authority. They have helped me to work out how prisoners' past experiences of other kinds of institutions have shaped their adaptations to imprisonment. For example:

I've always had a problem with trusting other people. Because I see the system as all being one.

From kids' homes to Probation to Social Services to Prison. It's all the same system. I didn't feel that I can talk to these people and tell them what's wrong, because I'm not going to get any help from them.

(Den)

Statements such as these only emerge out of, or make sense in the context of, much fuller life stories. They have also helped me to see how some aspects of prisoner culture – the pervasive difficulties of trust, the almost pathological hatred of sex offenders – are connected to certain kinds of shared biographical experiences: the frequency of institutional neglect, personal betrayal and abuse. When some prisoners talk about their attitudes to bullying, these connections could hardly be clearer:

X was being bullied [...]. Now, if anyone goes near him to give him any grief whatsoever the person that gives him grief will be like out of the jail in hospital, because he's been bullied the whole of his life. I was bullied by my dad up to the age of eighteen so I know what being bullied is like. [...] I hate people that pick on the weak in jail, I really do detest bullies in jail.

(Bradley)

This is not to claim that prison culture is reducible to biographical episodes, but to suggest that paying attention to prisoner life stories can help us understand more about prisoner culture, and about the location of the prison in the wider narratives of prisoners and in society more broadly. ■

Dr Ben Crewe is Deputy Director, Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

References

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