

'Integrity, always integrity'

Laura Piacentini argues for the importance of personal and researcher integrity in prison research

When we enter the prison world we enter a sociological minefield and a world of troubling ruptures. Once there, we see a place where power and control ebb and flow in complex ways that are sometimes visible, but mostly hidden until we become embedded cogs in the penal machine. Prison ethnography demands we think of ourselves, our audiences, our sanity and our motives. Whilst research in non-carceral institutions offers similar realities for researchers, spaces of punishment are exceptional in the ways they internalise order, beliefs and behaviour. Many relationships are constructed for basic survival – in the purest sense of the word – and it is almost impossible to imagine the prison site as anything but destabilising for a researcher.

However, in the defences that we put up to 'cope' with the 'field', the prison ethnographer can often overlook the question of integrity, specifically, creating research integrity zones within regimes. The foundations that I have built in establishing a research profile on contemporary Russian imprisonment have produced a very distinctive conundrum, indeed contradiction, of both embedded hiddenness on the one hand, and, at the same time, high visibility. An important personal commitment to myself as an academic in the prison field is the commitment that I have made to others within the research site. This has led to a recurring research dilemma of demonstrating integrity to a range of penal actors. My response to these dilemmas is to bring us back to what I think must be the central proposition for ethnographers and this is: 'what does an ethnographer hope to find in the

field?' In order to answer this question, briefly here, business organisation research has provided me with a set of cues for navigating the terrain of the prison.

Firstly, prison ethnography for me is about 'honouring my word' and the parts that make up prison ethnography are:

What I say – *stating explicitly what I set out to achieve*. What I know – *doing research as I know it is meant to be done*. Who do I hold myself out to be? What is expected of me – *even when not explicitly expressed, what do others expect me 'to do'?* What I stand for – *fundamental to who I am and why I am there*.

Secondly, it is what is said – and what is said by my actions – that is the key to my ethnographic approach and at the centre of this is integrity. Integrity is the cornerstone of all research, yet it is underexplored in ethnographic research and is often assumed to be present. I have learned that integrity is not an inherent feature of research nor is it a research instrument. Integrity is as much about virtue, as it is about wholeness and completeness. It is about 'honouring your word', which is the same as saying 'I will honour the standards for research that I set'. In honouring standards set, appropriate parameters are laid down and it is these parameters that make them effective tools for understanding the human behaviour that we study.

Thirdly, for me, integrity is also the consistency of actions; the clarity of thoughts and deeds and the truthfulness of values presented and developed. To have integrity, therefore, is to aim for wholeness, *positivity* and to produce workable frameworks that *enhance* performance in the research field. Without integrity, there is no

accountability and the ethical, careful and honest measures we put into place to ensure we protect our participants' confidentiality will fall apart.

Prison ethnographers quickly learn that prisons are subject to a particular form of *representation* (public / political / cultural / contingent / emotional), which means that the balance between integrity and accountability is more acutely felt. I refer here to the often asked question of 'why do we do prison research'? And, perhaps, 'why there'? A combination of sheer curiosity that Russia remains an uncharted territory coupled with a long-standing personal interest in the region that extended to mastering the language, made the site one of rich and potent allure. What one learns from doing research in Russia is that 'the place' (Russia) and the 'the site' (the prison) were the repositories of a unique cultural discourse: the relationship between the prison and the state in Russia is a particularly clear mirror reflection of the relationship between the person and the state. To understand how that relationship has evolved in contemporary Russian culture, my task is to penetrate the effect of penal culture on individuals' sense of agency as guards and inmates. My integrity to those with whom I research, therefore, is mediated by my cultural awareness of the environment.

I believe I can still have integrity and create meaningful research knowledge, even when the outside environment becomes hostile, turbulent even. This is referred to as a 'privately optimal' approach (Erhard et al., 2009), meaning I can create meaningful knowledge and have integrity even where the other is negative towards me. ■

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Reference

Erhard, W., Jensen, M. and Zaffron, S. (2009), 'Integrity: A Positive Model that Incorporates the normative phenomena of morality, ethics and legality', Harvard Business School NOM Research Paper No. 06-11.