

# Identity and emotion in a high security prison

Alison Liebling considers prison research as emotional 'edgework'

*Emotion is ... ubiquitous, although often operating less obviously and visibly, underground.*

(Layder, 2004)

*Them first three years ... I wasn't coping very well with my emotions.*

(Prisoner)

Close empirical research in prisons raises all kinds of methodological, political, moral, emotional and operational matters, let alone conceptual challenges related to making sense of the data. The project I have just completed (with Helen Arnold and Christina Straub) – a repeat study of staff – prisoner relationships in a high security prison first carried out 12 years earlier – has been the most complex and difficult research exercise I have ever undertaken, in all of these respects (although I have encountered difficult projects before; see, e.g. Liebling, 1999). Why was this the case? One of the first readers of the report (Liebling et al., 2011) described our account as 'heartbreaking'. When she said it, I thought that was precisely the right word.

This study constituted emotional 'edgework' (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998) – organised but deep, vivid, immersed, and intrusive – on us as well as on our research participants. Ferrell and Hamm suggest that 'our goal should be the integration and full use of ourselves as, simultaneously, complex human beings with unique individual biographies and trained and dedicated researchers'. Ferrell and Hamm also argue that 'methodological choices inevitably intertwine with theoretical stances [and] political choices' (ibid). Loïc

Wacquant suggests that some types of ethnographic projects 'demand an extraordinary investment in time, physical courage and intellectual energy' ... 'including 'after the data collection phase' (Wacquant, personal communication). This study challenged our professional identities and views about the world, and prisons, as well as our emotional well-being.

Three of the key emotions to arise in this research were fear, love and anger. We experienced some of these emotions ourselves as well as finding them everywhere in the field. Two of the main reasons for the emotional complexity of the research were related to, first, the impossibility of being with and getting to know (and like) young, physically healthy men in their twenties or early thirties who had been sentenced to indeterminate or life sentences, with tariffs often longer than their ages. Their condition was simply unmanageable, for them, and for us as their witnesses. Secondly, it was distressing to come as close as we came to the fear and risk of radicalisation and their effects on all parties, as well as on a prison that was once more legitimate, professional or humane or relational than it was by the time of the second visit. So much of what we found reflected a new context and its effects: a prison that is more 'new penological' in many respects and an era that is more punitive and risk-laden than the era before (1998-1999). One of the transformations

observable at Whitemoor between 'Time 1' and 'Time 2' was the reduction in levels of trust flowing in the prison. Whilst prisons are generally low trust environments, this shift from 'a little' to 'barely any' made the prison feel unhealthy and destructive. The environment we were trying to describe was more than usually impenetrable. There were prisoners we did not feel able to approach. There were others who did not (dare to) reveal critical information about themselves, which we sometimes learned from other sources. There were so many comings and goings at senior management level throughout the course of the project, that it was difficult to establish relationships. This had repercussions.

Prisons seem to me to be primarily about extreme and varying uses of power and authority, as well as about complex social organisation, and as Layder has argued, 'emotion is a constant companion of power' (2004). Distinctions in the use of power or authority give rise to distinctive emotional climates in prison. These kinds of differences – in what might be called staff-prisoner relationships,

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but which are really differences in approaches to, and uses or under-uses of power – produce emotions in those on the receiving end, and constitute a substantial part of the explanation

for variations in distress and suicide in individual prisons (Liebling et al., 2005). It is easy in a prison to provide what Barbalet refers to as 'sociological critique through an emotions perspective', (Barbalet, 1998) as people litter their accounts of what is going on with their emotional reactions to the environment. Experience is intensified.

So of course researchers experience emotions when they do research in prison. I have argued elsewhere that 'emotions constitute

data' (Liebling, 1999). We often learn most (in life as well as in prison) when our bodies do the work for us, detecting cues, recognising danger, sensing tension, or sharing frustration. This is tricky though. Can we trust our physiologies? Do they change over a life course? Is the researcher who studied Whitemoor prison in 1998 similarly configured in 2010? I am not sure.

As Weber argued, sociology 'concerns itself with the interpretive understanding of social action...Empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place' (Weber, in Ferrell and Hamm, 1998). In other words, we may understand affectual worlds more deeply, when we have access to, or experience of, those emotions in ourselves. Evaluations of one's circumstances are often performed below the level of consciousness – at the level of emotion.

So prisoners' evaluations, and also our own as researchers, are shaped by our experience of feelings. Emotion is a source of evaluation of circumstances. This is important, but also has to be managed, guided by

careful, painstaking research methods, and analysed at some distance.

Prisoners described a crisis of *identity* and a crisis of *recognition*.

We found long-term prisoners at early stages in their sentences struggling to survive psychologically, or to find meaning in their environments. Prisoners complained often that love, meaning and identity were nowhere to be found, and yet

constituted deep and pressing needs. They were often emotional and positive when they found education or music. Undertaking Open University degrees led to a new perspective on their pasts and futures, and a greater understanding of the social context in which their lives had taken shape. This motivated and energised them. So there was considerable and intense emotion at Whitemoor, and also much emotion management and avoidance going on.

I learned much about the limits of my professional role, and my lack of tolerance for aspects of modern penal policy and politics. New penological practices produce different emotions, in staff, prisoners, Governors and in research teams.

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We neglect their meaning at our peril. ■

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