PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL
January 2016 No 223

Special Edition

PRisoN: Unlocking prison research

Reviews

Book Review

The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography

By Deborah H. Drake, Rod Earle and Jenifer Sloane (eds.)
Publisher: Palgrave Handbooks (2015)
ISBN: 978-1-137-40387-2 (Hardcover)
Price: £135.00 (Hardcover)

Prison ethnography is a completely unique approach that gets close to the prison life that only prison staff and prisoners will usually experience. Although each researcher will share many of the same experiences, they will also have their own due to the variances within the prison estate such as prison categories, regimes, staff and security. Equally each researcher will develop their own perspectives of prison life shaped by their individual personalities, emotions and beliefs. Even those who have been incarcerated or worked inside prisons, can only ever be experts of their own experiences, however, every individual including staff, inmates and researchers, will experience the 'pains of imprisonment' (p.41) albeit at varying levels. With a foreword by Professor Yvonne Jewkes, the book is divided into four sections including 'About Prison Ethnography' which assesses methodological, theoretical and practical issues relating to the use of ethnographic and qualitative enquiry in prisons; 'Through Prison Ethnography' which considers the significance of ethnographic insights in terms of wider social or political concerns; 'Of Prison Ethnography' which analyses different aspects of the roles ethnographers take and how they negotiate their research settings; and finally, 'For Prison Ethnography' which includes contributions that convincingly extend the value of prison ethnography beyond the prison itself.[1] To give as best of an overview as possible of the book, I have carefully selected chapters from each of these sections.

Prison ethnographers display an unwavering passion for their research while encountering many obstacles — both physical and emotional. David Scott, for example, in Part I talks about his study of prison chaplains giving an unusual insight into a group of individuals rarely (if ever) studied in the prison setting and focuses on the staff/prisoner dynamics (always a topic of contention) highlighting the 'pains of imprisonment' not just felt by prisoners but also prison officers (p.41). David Scott sees prison research and writings as subjective to the author who gives varying accounts of prison life, and therefore Scott approaches his study from the abolitionist perspective examining all human interactions and the dehumanisation of prison.

Also in Part I, Alison Liebling's workshops with dialogue groups demonstrate the dynamics involved between researchers, staff and prisoners with prisoners being referred to as 'the new budding criminologists' (p.78), bringing Cohen and Taylors[2] classic work firmly into the current literature which also echoes the contemporary convict criminologist perspective.[3] Leibling et al. highlight problems of inequalities, social order, justice and humanity. The dialogue groups enable the researchers to see the prisoners as a whole and through intimate and sometimes intense discussion were able to gain an insight into the true characteristics of the men. Identity was raised several times, for example, some of the prisoners were keen to adopt a student identity. This highlights the importance of identities amongst prisoners consistent with other findings.[4]

Identities are continually negotiated throughout each researchers journey too, giving a deeper look into their psyche which includes several insider/outsider scenarios with each researcher reflecting on his/her own emotions, worries and fears. On this topic, Jamie Bennett, in Part III, draws on several identities where he categorises himself — in particular as a prison manager — researching within an environment where he holds a particular senior level of authority. This brings a much needed, fresh angle of the 'insider' ethnographer role where his identity as researcher/prison manager enables him to view his surroundings through different eyes while also encountering mixed responses towards his predicament from other staff members. Another interesting perspective on reflectivity comes from Abigail Rowe also in Part III who reflects on her own identity as a gay woman researching in a woman's prison. The dynamics surrounding her interactions with others made her question what researchers' should and shouldn't disclose which gives

1. Palgrave Macmillan (2015) *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography.* [online] Available at: http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/The-Palgrave-Handbook-of-Prison-Ethnography/?sf1=barcode&st1=9781137403872
2. Cohen, S. and Taylor, L. (1972) *Psychological Survival: Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment* (London: Penguin Books).
3. Earle, R., (2014) *Insider and out: Making sense of a prison experience and a research experience.* Qualitative Inquiry, Vol 20 (4) 429-438. Sage.
4. Pike, A, (2013) *Prison-based transformative learning and its role in life after prison.* PhD thesis. Open University; Bilby, C et al., (2013) *Re-imagining futures: Exploring arts interventions and the process of desistance* (Commissioned by Arts Alliance) *http://www.artsalliance.org.uk/re-imagining-futures-exploring-arts-interventions-and-process-desistance*

another unique perspective of how prison ethnography affects deep seated emotions and inner conflicts. In her narrative she quotes Alison Leibling: 'Our emotions do not need to be reconciled with our so-called data. They constitute data.' (p.351). The boundaries between researcher and participant can sometimes become blurred as Laura Piacentini discusses in Part 1, when she reflects on her field notes of one of her most uncomfortable personal experiences while socialising through what she describes as 'a by-product of deep cultural immersion' (p.89).

Privileged access offers an interesting aspect such as one study conducted by Rod Earle and Coretta Phillips on the 'dynamics of difference and their impact of social relations' (p.230). In Part II, this chapter shares an example where Coretta Phillips identity as a black woman gave her privileged access to black participants. In a different way William Davies, Part IV, experienced this same privileged access through disclosing his identity as an ex-prisoner. Although Coretta Phillips gained this initial privilege through her physical identity, Bill Davies (a Convict Criminologist) gained the same courtesy through disclosing his insider status to prisoners. From the outset this enabled both of them to formulate a mutual trust and rapport with prisoners that otherwise may have been less productive and taken much longer. James Waldram, Part II, goes beyond the prison gates in his chapter, *Writing bad: Prison Ethnography and the problem of tone,* highlighting the pitfalls and obstacles of publishing what many viewed as contentious research on sex offenders. Met with prejudice and resistance, he reveals how sex offenders were seen as 'not worthy of being celebrated' though research studies and publications (p.217) which brings into question the ethical dilemmas of inclusion and exclusion.

This book is a fascinating read in its uniqueness of rare insights and large collection of very diverse personal journeys and reflections from field notes and life stories, opening up a world most only ever hear about in the media. It is a must for those entering the field of prison research and would give the novice researcher an invaluable rich source of information.

David Honeywell *is a part time Criminology Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University and a PhD researcher and tutor at the University of York.*