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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Earle, Rod (2014). Insider and out: reflections on a prison experience and research experience. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(5) pp. 429–438.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1077800413515832>

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## **Insider and out – making sense of a prison experience and a research experience<sup>i</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

#### **Prison Insider research – a special case?**

Building on the classic Chicago School traditions of deep immersion in the field of study and intimate alignment with research subjects' experience, ethnographic approaches have established themselves as pre-eminent forms of qualitative social inquiry. Notwithstanding the controversies surrounding their distinctive features and their chronological sequencing in the rich history of sociological research at the University of Chicago ( see Deegan 2007; Fine 1995), much of this ethnographic prestige rests on the assertion that ethnographic methods provide a unique way of getting 'inside' social settings and securing the perspectives of insiders in social and cultural groupings. Ethnographic researchers seek direct contact with the lives and experiences of their research subjects by using participant-observation techniques that draw from anthropological research traditions. The conventional ethnographic researcher moves across the boundaries that divides 'us' from 'them' by becoming an insider for a time. As an insider access is gained to cultural practices and norms obscure to those outside the group. The 'insider' approach is based on the assumption that only those within a particular cultural group have access to understandings of the group's cultural norms, routines and experience.

In recent decades ethnographic research in such areas as youth culture, gender identities and ethnicity have increasingly been conducted by investigators with some degree of initial cultural proximity to the individuals or cultures under the research gaze (Hodkinson 2005). Hodkinson's careful elaboration of the epistemological implications of his pre-existing 'Goth' identity as a researcher of Goth youth sub-cultures demonstrates the potentials of an insider approach. Hodkinson's approach eschews simplistic identity binaries in favour of a more complex and nuanced account of negotiating specific insider privileges, and recognizing both their limitations and wider epistemological implications. The possible 'privileges' can involve exploiting well-established proximities to the field of study and intimate experiential knowledge to secure access to otherwise obscure aspects of Goth culture. It can prompt methodological innovation by offering a trilateral reflexive framework of field immersion, personal biography and professional distance. Hodkinson's cautious

embrace of his 'insider' resources provides a model for avoiding the pitfalls of a crude identity essentialism that the insider/outsider dichotomy has a tendency to reinforce. Feminist theorists have long promoted the importance of producing knowledge from situated experiences, specifically the position of women, on the basis that women's self-conscious identity as women makes the hierarchical dynamics of gender explicit. These 'standpoint epistemologies' privilege the insider perspective, promote the insights of direct experience and respect the contingencies of identity (Harding 1987, Cain 1990).

Hall (1997), among many others, points to the fluid and multi-dimensional qualities of identities. He reframes the reductive binaries and exclusive hierarchies of race with the language and practice of 'new ethnicities'. This work consolidates the potential for post-colonial perspectives to challenge the positivistic hegemony of Eurocentric social science. However, notwithstanding the complexity and contingency of intersectional identities, and the haunting presence of the insider/outsider dyad for the ethnographic researcher, for the person in prison being an insider is an unfortunately straightforward distinction, and an explicitly defining one. In the next sections I explore some of the implications of this predicament using reflections on my own 'time served' as a prisoner alongside 'time spent' as a prison researcher on a recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project.

### **Key questions to take up in prison research?**

Among the ethical and methodological dilemmas of undertaking research in prisons (Sparks et al. 1996), the question of whether to take up the offer of keys and free-movement around the prison, appears to have receded from recent prison ethnographies (Crewe 2009). Jewkes (2002) refers to how having keys marks you out immediately, observing that in taking the keys you deny yourself access to a central element of prisoners' experience; you take the freedom to pass through doors that is routinely denied to them. This, it is argued, compromises the ethnographic endeavour to align oneself with the prisoner's condition of unfreedom. However, the formal and complete denial of liberty imposed by a court of law is not one that can be entered into very effectively by proxy. Stevens (2012:530), for example, refers to her work in 'therapeutic community prisons' as 'semi-ethnographic in recognition that it is impossible for any 'free-world' researcher to become completely immersed in, or truly experience the realities of, the prison'.

The decision to take keys frees the researcher from an unhelpful dependency on prison officers and allows them to move around the various parts of the prison. This ease of access is

often a pragmatic choice of mutual convenience to the researcher and the prison administration. It may be a characteristic of contemporary English prison research in which relatively trustful and accommodating relations exist between prison researchers and prison administrators, compared to the more conflicted circumstances described by Cohen and Taylor (1981) in the 1970s. .

The advantages of being able to roam the prison unaccompanied by officers and not directed by them are substantial. It allows the researcher to explore the prison free from some of the constraints that prison officers might want to impose on them but it lifts one of the most abiding aspects of confinement from the field of experience. How it feels when you can't go where you want, when you want, only where you are told, or where you are allowed, is central to the prisoner experience and relatively remote from the researcher's.

Among my most uncomfortable encounters as a serving prisoner was having to attend workshops frequented by the only prisoner who really scared me. He was a man not much older than me who I suspected of identifying me as someone he could bully. I felt he was an insecurely aggressive man, a bully, who needed to identify a victim to position himself in a male hierarchy he found disorienting and uncomfortable. I recognised that feeling, his responses and my own predicament; they reminded me of aspects of that other notoriously homo-social institution, the English boarding school, a less austere but not so-distant institutional cousin. I knew our paths would cross and that I could handle him in short intervals, in company, and developed strategies of avoidance but the strain of doing so, and the precariousness of my success, weighed on me. I felt this weight again on a couple of occasions conducting fieldwork in both HMP Rochester and HMP Maidstone but its burden was so much more easily lifted, and not just because I am a lot older and a little wiser. Sometimes, if I felt awkward in the company of some prisoners, or didn't like the vibes I was picking up, I simply moved on, the keys I carried on my belt transported me through the bars and the gates to another part of the prison, or allowed me to return to the office to take stock. Doing so reminded me of the times I couldn't, and of the feeling of being both trapped and vulnerable.

Sensitivity to these feelings are more readily recognised in the prison research literature by women researchers in men's prison, not just because of their contrapuntal gender positioning in the almost exclusively male environment, but also because they are more likely to be directly and personally encountered. Women researchers tend to be more explicit in their discussion of some of the more threatening, difficult and oppressive dynamics of gender they negotiate in men's prisons. Jewkes (2002, 2005), for example, reflects on how her position as

a woman researcher in a men's prison involved contending with preconceptions about her vulnerability and the gendered management of her appearance and safety.

Possessing keys, particularly for men, tends to allow for these difficult, uncomfortable experiences to be minimised, perhaps neutralised, in ways I am not convinced are entirely helpful to an ethnographic approach. The almost literal voltage of power that keys symbolise is that of privileges men tend to find harder to recognise because they are so familiar with being in the current. The feelings of being subject to someone-else's powers, and other less tangible permutations of people exerting power over you, are important features of men's prison life for qualitative researchers in prison, and men may have ground to make up to connect with these feelings.

Men are obviously no strangers to feelings of vulnerability, but tend to invest more heavily in managing and cancelling its appearances, particularly in the company of other men and this disappearing act carries over, inevitably, into their writing (Jewkes 2012, but see Crewe, this volume). Not only does this accord with the prevailing conventions of criminological publishing i.e. largely purged of personal, subjective perspective in favour of the more valorised 'rational objectivity', it is also closely aligned with the privileged and correspondingly 'invisible' (i.e. mainly to men) dispositions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). It reflects the difficulty in shifting the 'analytical starting point' from prison to men, from researching 'men as prisoners rather than prisoners as men' (Sim 1993:101). Redressing the relative absence of gender reflexive accounts from men in prison research could take male researchers into different and potentially productive territory (Sabo et al 2001). What kind of different accounts would male researchers present of men's prisons, how would they process their research experiences, if they included a week, say, spent continuously in the prison, using a prison cell and living under the regime as prisoners do, albeit as a 'guest'? Even such short-lived and elective experiences could, I think, provide valuable insights currently unavailable in the methods of immersion and patterns of access that characterise most contemporary prison research by men. Such a move might encourage a shift in emphasis from prison to prisoner research, from a gender blind, or gender neutral, to a gender specific perspective. It might challenge men as prison researchers to develop new forms of consent and collaboration involving men in prison more directly in the terms of access and contours of the fieldwork (Cowburn 2007). The ultimate gatekeepers will inevitably remain prison administrations, and the barriers they erect can be substantial, but more open and explicit inclusion of prisoners could be attempted more often (see Sabo et al 2001).

Strange as such proposals and methods of working may sound they resemble fieldwork conducted by Sacha Darke in the therapeutic margins of the Brazilian prison system (Darke 2013). The inmates in these prisons exercise remarkable levels of control and self-management of their 'secure' conditions and collaborate enthusiastically with researchers, up to and including providing them with accommodation on the wings.

In the USA Jacob's (1974:p232) reported invitation from the convict he worked with to 'find out what it's all about' by entering the prison as an inmate may have been freighted with unhelpfully aggressive intent ('you phoney cock-sucker', 'your bullshit research') but other prisoners also asked why he 'didn't become an inmate for a week or two in order to experience the totality of their world' (p237). That question, or ones similar, were asked of me more than once, and I'm sure have been asked of other men researching in men's prisons. Although perhaps posed with a degree of mischievous intent simply to unsettle the researcher by emphasising the inadequacy of their approach, and playing with the testing homophobia that frequently permeates men's conversation, such questions could be taken more seriously. It's a fair point. In my case it forced my hand to disclose, somewhat hesitantly and awkwardly, my own limited experience of custody. At the time I was both reluctant and ill-equipped to develop the theme of insider perspective for fear of where it might lead and how it might distract from the already hard-to-pin-down aspects of ethnicity and identity we were seeking to elicit during the fieldwork and interview process (Phillips 2008; Phillips and Earle 2010). Only since leaving the field, developing a more secure academic career and, crucially, meeting one or two other men on similar trajectories with similar experiences have I considered the question more seriously. This article is an attempt to situate these insider experiences of 'serving time' in the penal sociology developed through researchers 'spending time' in prison.

### **Inside prison sociology**

In prison research the boundaries of insider status and collective identities are the stock-in-trade of prison sociology. Within most penal research, two theoretical models have guided qualitative studies of prisoners' identities and social relations. The first, derived from Sykes (1958) classic study, is known as the 'indigenous model'. It suggests men's identities on entry to prison are subsumed by a master prisoner status imposed by the grim routines and regimentation of prison life. These formally strip the individual of their erstwhile identity and impose what Foucault (1979) thought of as a 'recoding of their existence'. The removal of a

my own clothes, the traditional 'shower' and the issue of a grey prison uniform were the practical manifestation of this that I encountered on my reception into prison in 1982. .

The second model, derived from Irwin and Cressey's (1962) work, and exemplified in Jacobs' (1977) organisational ethnography of *Stateville*, suggests prison identities are less discrete to the prison itself and draw more from external, racialised identities. In Irwin and Cressey's 'importation model', largely pre-existing identities from outside the prison condense into its social hierarchies, its informal economy and most religious activity. In more recent contemporary sociological prison research a hybrid model is acknowledged that synthesises elements of both the 'importation' and 'indigenous' models of prisoners' social and cultural life but prisoners are acknowledged as groups of people with 'particular distinctive characteristic or set of characteristics'.

The limitations of conventional ethnographic methods in the context of prison research are identified by Leibling (1999) and few scholars have done more to extend the range, depth and reach of qualitative research in prisons. 'Appreciative inquiry' and 'reserved participation' (Leibling 1999, 2004, 2011) acknowledge the difficulties of ethnographic immersion in prisoner's lives and the urgency of accounting for their predicaments and understanding their form. The efflorescence of subsequent prison research at the Prisons Research Centre at Cambridge University (<http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/research/prc/>) and elsewhere, is testimony to the rigour of this approach, the tumescent growth of the penal estate in the UK and its appetite for research knowledge and graduates.

### **Once upon a penal time: An inside story and a journey back**

You don't have to spend very long inside a prison to begin to feel its exceptional qualities. In June 2006 I began working with Coretta Phillips in two English men's prisons on an ESRC funded project; 'Identity, Ethnicity and Social Relations in Prison' (see Phillips 2012). The research, in HMP Maidstone and HMYOI Rochester in Kent, SE England, adopted qualitative research methods involving two eight month periods of fieldwork in each prison. We spent as much time as we could, sometimes together, sometimes separately, talking with prisoners and hanging around the wings, workshops and restricted social spaces of the prisons. We accumulated hundreds of hours 'spending time' in the field but not much of it felt like 'serving time', or got close to the sense of doing a prison sentence. Imagine, for a moment, being locked in a train compartment crowded with people you've never met for about three months, and consider that this train is never going to move but all around you, unseen, the world whirls and moves on. This is the disorienting stasis I experienced in 1982

as a prisoner in my early twenties in a short, and characteristically unnecessary, prison sentence. It was an experience I found I could not avoid reflecting on once I returned to prison environments as a qualitative researcher.

One of the ironic consequences of being removed from society is to realize a little more clearly some of its contours. Prison is a place so removed from the rhythms of the social world that temporality (experienced time) is heavily distorted. A sense of 'the future', which should be an open horizon, becomes all-but-inoperative while you are in prison (Nakagawa 1993). I think it is quite common to feel that there is no future *within* a prison sentence, nothing between going-in and coming-out but the pre-established routines, the prison timetable, to drift through. As the fictional gang leader, Avon Barksdale, remarks in the acclaimed HBO television series *The Wire* (Season 3, Episode 7) 'you only do two days inside; the day you go in and the day you come out'.

In terms of social ontology a prison sentence blocks what Merleau-Ponty (1968) has called the originary power of "I can", the innate power to realize the formation of human possibilities. In being deprived of so much of what is essential to social living, a person in prison is drawn toward the essentially lonely, separate condition that Erich Fromm (1957/2010:10) suggested was 'the source of all anxiety', and must find resources to defend against such anxiety. Having been propelled into a physical world so manifestly not of their own making, prisoners may fashion, at least metaphysically, imaginatively, a world of their own, but it is an interior landscape, 'a life inside' as Erwin James (2003) so aptly and elegantly describes it. It is one that is hard to research and researching it differently, as Jewkes proposes with this special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* is long overdue.

The recognised 'pains of imprisonment' close off conventional existential horizons but through their closure, they are, I think, ironically and painfully, made more apparent to a prisoner. The possibility of possibilities is made real by their withdrawal (Nakagawa 1993). I think many men in prison contend, at various levels, with ontological dilemmas of who they are, and how they want to be as men; they work on the blockages the prison tacitly reveals and overtly reinforces. I don't know if just 3 months incarceration qualifies me to comment or if after 3, or 30, years in prison I'd feel the same about it, but getting some better purchase on men's interior experiences of penal interiors is a neglected area of prison sociology.

On being unexpectedly sentenced to penal custody in 1982 I recall the feeling of suddenly being propelled from one world into another as I was taken from the courtroom to the local prison on the hill at the edge of the city. In that moment of sentence, though I did not realise it at the time, I had become an article of property that belonged to the state (Ruggiero 2010).

My life was not my own anymore, it was the state's and it is this experience of dominion that is so elusive, gendered and telling. Though the transportation from one way of being in the world to the other was physically relatively uncomplicated, the transformation from person to property is less readily appreciated and thus much harder for qualitative researchers to apprehend or convey.

Crewe and Bennett's (2012) recent collection, *The Prisoner*, is a creative attempt to populate the void of scholarly accounts by prisoners on prison. As they note in the Foreword even after a decade of innovatory and expansive prison research:

Little of what we know about prison comes from the mouths of prisoners, and very few academic accounts of prison life manage to convey some of its most profound and important features: its daily pressures and frustrations, the culture of the wings and landings, and the relationships which shape the everyday experience of being imprisoned. (Bennett and Crewe, 2012: ii)

An Afterword is provided by Jason Warr (2012), an ex-prisoner en route to becoming an academic. He notes the alarmingly widespread 'cultural ignorance' of what prison life is actually like. This misapprehension is not confined to "those who have friends, family members and loved ones behind bars" but is shared by "many academics who are actively engaged with the literature on prisons and imprisonment" (ibid, 143). His brief and moving account of the way "prison affects every aspect of your being" and his suggestion that "very few students or academics with whom I have contact have any understanding of what truly occurs behind bars" indicates the urgent need for more creative ways of doing prison research. In particular, I share Warr's sense of the deep psychic impact that prison has on 'the soul'. There is a life inside 'life inside' that largely escapes academic scrutiny.

Perhaps that's not so surprising. David Wilson (2011:546), a former prison governor turned professor of criminology, recounts his astonishment at hearing 'one of this country's most noted professors of criminology' confess that despite writing regularly about punishment he had 'actually never set foot inside a prison'. How, asked Wilson, could such a scholar 'write or know anything about how punishment is experienced if he had never walked through the prison's gates, heard the clink of the prison officer's keys, smelled the rotting smell of humans placed in too close proximity to one another, or watched helplessly as the pain and misery that prison produces is played out before his eyes?'. Wilson's welcome emphasis on the sensory aspects of prison life, its sounds and smells, indicate his familiarity with the

environment, and the significance of their absence in the mind of his academic colleague. However, as with King's observation about the necessity of researchers spending time in a prison, Wilson's familiarity, though intimate, is not that of the inmate, the prisoner, the real insider.

An honourable exception to the general exclusion of prisoner's views of imprisonment is to be found in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* (?see Piche, this issue?). The journal encourages submissions from serving and ex-prisoners, and fosters collaborative writing projects between established prison academics, prisoners and ex-prisoners. Supported by an editorial board of academics, activists and advisers the journal publishes twice yearly peer-reviewed issues. As the managing editors Larsen and Piche (2012:1) note the journal emerged a decade ago "in response to the underrepresentation of the voices of the criminalised in criminological and public discourse on punishment". By bringing these voices forward the journal expands the range of criminological theorising and generates challenging pedagogical and methodological perspectives for criminologists to digest. Produced in Canada under the imprint of the University of Ottawa Press, the journal is not easily found in UK academic collections but deserves wider readership among penologists and the general criminological research community (to subscribe visit [www.jpp.org.uk](http://www.jpp.org.uk)). In an era when academic publishing seems to specialise in circulating the same ideas to the same people and functions principally as a buoyancy aid to career ascendancy through a grid established by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* is something of a breath of fresh air, an exemplar in doing it differently. .

### **Visions of social control**

In November 2007, mid-way through the second period of fieldwork I made the following note in my journal on the way the prison was affecting me:

"I sometimes think, abstractly as I'm conducting fieldwork, travelling to the prison, or away from it, that the prison order is the order of a police state, i.e. a society of almost total control where there is only the (aberrant, dangerous, lonely) Individual (man) and The State (men). I don't know what to do with this dystopian image that haunts me. Is it the spectre that haunts the Western, the Late Modern, social imagination? (following De Certeau – "Believing is running out, being exhausted, leaving only seeing, seeing like a state" find ref????)".

[Fieldnote, 4/11/2007]

It is tempting (particularly for men) to see men's prisons as a microcosm of a whole society. Several eminent social theorists suggest ominous and portentous analogies from fairly limited contact with the institution. Foucault's (1978:14) analysis of its panoptic features declares them "a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power as well as those subject to it". For Deleuze (1992) they serve as the ultimate 'analogical model' of a particular kind of 'society of control'. Bauman (1993:122) advises that prisons are fertile ground for sociological research because "...penal practice may serve as a laboratory where the tendencies attenuated and adulterated elsewhere can be observed in their pure form; after all, control and order are the outspoken objectives of the prison system". Loic Wacquant (2002: 386) suggests that we recognise the prison as a '*template* or vector of broader social forces, political nexi, and cultural processes that traverse its walls'. Jerome Miller (2000, cited in Shalev 2011:28) tells us that "prisons and jails are an early warning system for society. They constitute the canary in the coalmine, providing an omen of mortal danger that often lies beyond our capacity to perceive". These perspectives suggest that in prison researchers may find evidence of social processes otherwise obscured or impending, as if prison relations can be scaled up to model those of wider society, or that they are stripped down forms of those operating in society at large, revealed from their social camouflage.

On my part, the fieldnote above is largely shaped by being consumed by the fieldwork process, drawn in by the compelling strangeness of prison life that will be familiar to other prison researchers. The fieldnote is testimony to the peculiar power of the institution and the hold it has over the sociological imagination, but being inside a prison, and getting inside the research literature, also posed particular personal and professional dilemmas for me. At times it resonated with my first experience but at others it also failed to connect. I was, for example, surprised to find De Certeau (1984) making an analogy for the constraints of modernity in the similarities between a train and a prison, the very image I had found that captured my experience that I referred to earlier. He suggests you can't 'get out' except at your allotted time, and that 'inside' modernity real life is suspended, life is reduced to a functionality that is accepted on the basis of the separation and compartmentalisation necessary for 'the journey' of the life course.

Visions of social control are magnified in prison, and can be hard to shake off, but the lens of experience through which the prison is viewed is best made explicit. The sense I make of my prison experience is one in which gender regimes loom large, and by extension shed light on wider gender orders (Connell 1987) but this foregrounding of gender found little correspondence in an academic literature that projects men's prison experience and the

prison's social function into a social totality that applies most intensely to only half the population.

### **Savoir faire: research in prison and the ironies of seeing both sides**

Although my memories of prison life have faded my return to prison environments as a researcher some 30 years later refreshed more than a few dormant senses of the meaning of imprisonment. Among these was the feeling of being suddenly 'thrown together' (Serge 1931/977) into a strange kind of crowd situation. It stirred a memory of a memory that it was a bit like early school days, the uncertainties of the playground but without the cover of childhood or the daily relief of 'hometime'. The trick, for me, back then in HMP Norwich, was to look inoffensive and inoffensively. I was careful to shield my confusion, distress and anxiety from close scrutiny. I found myself doing the same as a prison researcher. Being an ethnographic researcher involves a continual but low key effort to maintain a viable combination of social distance and interaction, a finely tuned sociable wariness. Ironically, this is not so very different from the managed distancing and enforced intimacies I remember of my brief time living as a prisoner.

Aspects of the ordinary, everyday craft of 'getting by' in a throng are not exclusive to prison living but I know of few places where they are as forcefully necessary. At one level they are relatively commonplace for anyone familiar with modern urban living, tacit skills learned on the bus, or the train, the aforementioned school playground and perhaps even the conference venue. As a qualitative researcher in prison it's a practice that involves some recalibration of the generic skills and techniques, though the basic rules remain. Part of it is learning what Goffman (1971:331-2) refers to as 'civil inattention'. It means learning to adopt the necessary superficial and glancing acknowledgement of presence, learning how to maintain rather than disrupt the brittle 'surface character of public order' that pervades the prison. It means not being like a stranger, but also acknowledging not being like a prisoner, somehow conveying an application of the rules of mutual non-engagement, while also trying to initiate some engagement. Being a researcher in the prison means continually trying to negotiate, and sometimes respectfully breach, these precariously maintained levels of equanimity without generating antagonism, distress or hostility.

Doing time as a prisoner and, later, researching in the crowded spaces of a prison I found that faces do not blur in the way Simmel (2000) suggests they do in the to and fro of the urban throng. They need to be continually distinguished and differentiated so as to maintain the appropriate 'civil distance' amongst the 'lived-alongside' and the 'lived-with'. In prison the

effort of doing so is a more continual and conscious one, and all the more exacting for being so. Aspects of ‘serving time’ can be like an extended series of condensed Buberian ‘mism meetings’ (Buber, cited in Bauman 1993:153); meetings that pretend not to be so, meetings that hold people off because they are strangers who are no longer at an appropriate distance, and are unlikely to pass into the middle distance of urban anonymity. In prison such interactions, such mism meetings, are a regular part of the social circuitry of prison life. Faces remain relatively close from one day to the next rather than disappearing or being avoidable. Luther, a young man at HMYOI Rochester, put it like this:

“And like, yeah, people like, see when you live in one place together, yeah, you get along, you’re forced to live together in one place.... On the outside you have choice; if you don’t want to get along with someone then you won’t see them the next day if you don’t want to.”

### **The Pains of Imprisonment: feeling but not touching**

The research task in prison is emotionally exacting, as is increasingly recognised (Jewkes 2011, Drake and Harvey 2010). The enforced stasis, of time and movement, imbue the place with a pervading sense of boredom and torpor. It is a place of institutionally endorsed inertia in a late modern world where experiences of both time and movement are accelerating and intensifying. I can remember on the day of my release from prison being amazed at the sheer velocity of things, everywhere, but cars especially. Other ex-prisoners have mentioned similar experiences to me.

In prison the absence of conventional sensory variations conditions the struggle for feelings. It is a world officially almost devoid of sensuality, a place where happiness may be measured in terms of a relative lack of hate or cold. A researcher can feel the prison’s draining force though it is but a quantum of the real soul sapping tendencies of serving time as a prisoner. It is not exactly ‘touching the void’ but an existential chill is palpable in prison fieldwork and remains under-theorised and under-examined. As Drake (2012) argues it is possible that the increasingly casual recourse to imprisonment in the UK derives from the underestimation or wilful ignorance of its fundamental pain – the denial of liberty.

I suspect that part of the cultural and personal fascination with prison, what I’ve taken (from Weber 1947) to thinking of as its perverse negative charisma and its symbolic authority, is the way it poses profound, but sometimes unwelcome, ontological questions of ‘being in place with others’. Life in prison sets up the kind of unavoidable pregnancies of responsibility to, and responsibility for, others that inevitably accompany human proximity (Levinas 1987),

but these social fundamentals are conditioned by the harshness of the punitive context. Levinas asks whether proximity coincides with affinity and although this may seem like the kind of abstract question only posed by lofty philosophers, it is, in my albeit limited experience, intuitively experienced and lived-through on a daily basis by anyone spending any length of time in prison, but most relentlessly by prisoners themselves. ‘What is there to care for in prison but the self?’ is the monad question men’s prisons insidiously pose, inviting, by implication, another equally existential or socio-theological question, the kind always posed, but rarely answered in the affirmative; ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Bauman 2000). The twisted existential ramifications of prison emerge in the thrown-togetherness of the spaces the prisoner is expected to occupy. As Massey (2005: 149-152) observes there is always a specific “politics of the event of place...[P]laces pose in particular form the question of our living together.... How the terms of connectivity might be negotiated” (2005 149-52). Ironically, again, in prison these politics are not so far removed from the politics of everyday life that so fascinated Raoul Vaneigem (1983), for it is a life from which much of the artifice of the spectacle has been stripped, it is ‘life remade’, exposed, as life reduced.

I hadn’t read much sociology in my early twenties when I was sent to prison, but I don’t think Bauman’s ideas could have affected me so powerfully now if I hadn’t have been in prison. I am convinced of his argument in *Postmodern Ethics* (Bauman 1993:140) that “[S]ociality, that counter-structural structuration, is an aesthetic phenomenon” and that as such it requires an ethnographic approach. I am less persuaded by his bleak diagnosis that “[O]ne way or another, the present divorce between state-centred politics and the moral existence of citizenry, or more generally between the state-managed institutional socialisation and communal sociality, seems far gone and perhaps irreversible”(ibid). Equally, I suspect my identification with Gilroy’s (2004) more optimistic rendition of modern, urban forms of conviviality is conditioned by having lived in the same neck of north London as him for many years. That both, authors and experiences, are profoundly implicated in my prison research and analysis reflects the general significance of qualitative researcher’s biography and affective hinterlands to their research outputs (Rock and Holdaway 1998; Phillips and Earle 2010; Earle 2011; Jewkes 2012).

### **Affinative research and another Convict Criminology?**

The epistemological questions about the viability of insider research are hotly contested. Far back in the early debates Merton (1972) was smart enough to recognise that social groups are less homogenous than they appear and their boundaries are both shifting and porous.

Conceptualisation of multiple, complex and intersectional identities have largely replaced the binary oppositions of the 1970s and 1980s so the original dichotomous framework must be handled with care, as Hodkinson's work in youth sub-cultures demonstrates.

Within US criminology radical and critical currents have to contend with the enormous and extraordinary growth of correctional institutions and their attendant academic disciplines. Conventional criminology is heavily implicated in, and, some would say, compromised by this explosive expansion. Convict Criminology (Richards and Lenza 2012:5) is a dissenting voice that was 'born of frustration ex-convict professors and graduate students felt when reading academic literature on prisons'. Established in 1997 and comprised of academics and graduate students with criminal convictions, the group has organised workshops, participated in academic conferences and published scholarly work to build a perspective they call 'The New School of Convict Criminology'.

The existence of such a group, albeit in the USA, indicated to me that my experiences of custody and crime could be significant in ways I had never had the confidence to consider properly but had intuitively felt throughout my working life. I was pushed further in this direction by meeting another prison researcher with more recent experience of attempting the transition 'from convict to campus', and together with supportive academic colleagues we resolved to try to establish a similar grouping on this side of the Atlantic (Arresti 2012, Earle 2011). Our own attempt at Convict Criminology shares many of the concerns of the US group and they have been hugely supportive of our efforts. We remain in different places, developmentally and in terms of the criminological constituencies, penal realities and histories we address. British Convict Criminology (<http://www.convictcriminology.org/bcc.htm>) is as much a working hypothesis as an organisational reality, necessarily vague and defined by its approach as well as its destination, but the signs are encouraging. An Advisory Group composed of established academics and supporters has been set up, and mentoring work with current prisoner students of criminology, and ex-prisoner undergraduate and postgraduate students of criminology has begun. A short article about our intentions in *Inside Time* (see link on website above), the newspaper produced for prisoners by ex-prisoners and delivered free of charge to every prison in the UK, generated an overwhelmingly supportive response. Many prisoners, it seems, share some of our concerns about misperceptions of the prison experience and of academic orientation toward it. We want to build these convict criminology perspectives and consolidate the distinctive contribution that ex-prisoners can make to criminological scholarship. For my part, I have been inspired by the potential intersection of radical, critical

scholarship with the mobilisation of hitherto neglected experiential perspectives that are, somewhat sadly, increasing in number. Recognising the diversity of these perspectives will be complex. Ex-Prisoners are not simply ex-prisoners and prison experiences vary according to gender, age, ethnicity and class. They vary by sentence length, offence category and the kind of prisons available. I think it would be a mistake for Convict Criminology to claim definitive insights or credentials for researching prisoner's experiences, or that there is a single, authentic truth to incarceration. We cannot 'tell it like it is' but telling it like it was for us will enrich the field for all.

Drawing on Halsey and Deegan's (2011:340) reworking of Whyte's (2000:1) ideas about 'people who have faced and overcome adversity ... hav[ing] special sensitivities and skills in helping others experiencing the same adversity', some of the distinguishing features of British Convict Criminology may include:

- some knowledge of crime and incarceration derived from direct experience of either or both as a perpetrator or prisoner.
- based on the above, a capacity for, and openness to, emotional identification or sense of kinship with prisoners' predicaments
- a more obvious absence of the condescension or contempt that permeates criminal justice procedures, derived from a common experience of incarceration and knowledge of its accompanying injuries and the techniques necessary to endure and survive them.
- the use of personal experiences and stories to elicit insights into and perspectives on incarceration, crime and victimisation.
- a willingness to be more direct in sharing personal experience and history than researchers dependent on conventional social research methods training

### **Bigger cages, longer chains, sweeter carrots?**

On the first day of the short prison sentence I served in my twenties I was joined in the reception cell by an older man, probably in his late forties, also starting his sentence. We exchanged the usual cagey formalities of 'what and how long are you in for?'. 'Three months' I said. 'Fuck me!' he scoffed 'I done more than that in a Panda car<sup>ii</sup>'. I believe he had and he faced a long haul on his latest sentence. He was the saddest, most broken man I met in the prison. The first days of a long sentence in prison can be like that, I'm told – no

road ahead, no road back. My own experience of prison was very brief. Being white and middle class combined to ensure its debilitations were shortlived. It is hardly typical. Prison sentences are getting longer, prisons are getting bigger and prisoners not only more numerous but also, in men's prisons, more elderly (Mann 2012) and darker in terms of ethnic profile (Phillips 2012). The shadow of the US penal nightmare looms ominously nearer as talk of Titan prisons returns (The Economist 2013).

Recently I heard a radio interview with the governor of a vast mid-west American prison. He indicated the extent of his prison by saying 'pretty much all you can see between here and the horizon, that's us.' Then, according to the reporter, he gestured to a workshop building, 'that's the busiest place here, that's where they make the coffins'. In addition to providing the local community with coffins, long-term inmates prided themselves not only on the woodcraft skills required for the job but on the kind of coffin they could make for themselves. They knew it was how they would leave the prison and they wanted to do it in style.

For some ex-prisoners another way of leaving the prison behind could be opening up and it involves helping criminologists to map its interiors and their own (Maruna 2001). I think Convict Criminology has a part to play in this and can help prison research push a few boundaries and dissolve some others.

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<sup>i</sup> The author acknowledges the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers in developing this article.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Panda Car' – a police vehicle, referring to the black and white colouring of police paraphernalia