


Prison Ethnography as Lived Experience: Notes From the Diaries of a Beginner Let Loose in Oslo Prison

Qualitative Inquiry
2014, Vol. 20(4) 471–480
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DOI: 10.1177/1077800413516272
qix.sagepub.com


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Abstract

This article reflects on my own experiences as a prison researcher and my position within the cultural web of the prison society. From the first minute of the first day of fieldwork, I entered into perpetual negotiations about my position in the prison and my proper place in the ever-present struggle between (various factions of) prisoners and officers. Entering a prison as a researcher is both scary and exciting. How would I be greeted? Would I be accepted? Where would I fit in? What is the correct degree of closeness and distance between a researcher and the researched in such an environment? How can one best relate to and balance the very different positions that are being ascribed to you, such as “suspicious stranger,” “responsible professional,” “unwanted intruder,” and “trusted confidant”? With excerpts from my fieldnotes, I reveal my own thoughts and feelings about entering the prison for the first time, struggling to fit in and, finally, settling in to the field while remaining alert to the potential minefields surrounding me. I also describe my responses to the performative expectations of masculinity that made me “legible” and to some extent “legitimate” in the eyes of prisoners and prison staff.

Keywords

prison ethnography, autoethnography, masculinity, agonistic approach

Introduction

Man has been called “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”¹ Ethnography can be understood as the systematic study of this web, and of its everyday re-spinning, in and through social interaction. It will involve at least some level of participation; studying the cultural web ethnographically means entering it and actually taking part in the interaction in question. For prison ethnographers, this entails spending some time in a prison and interacting with the people who work and live there. Alison Liebling (1999) sums up the prison ethnographer’s tool kit thus:

To do ethnographic research in a prison, you need time, the equivalent of a mud hut [. . .], paper and a pencil. You might introduce a tape-recorder and other refinements, but what you need most of all is *full use of your self*. (p. 475, original emphasis)

An ethnographer needs to participate, to immerse herself or himself into the cultural web of the prison, and to become a part of it as far as possible. She or he should strive to think, act, communicate, and feel as someone positioned in the web. Ethnographers need to be emotionally present, as well as intellectually and physically. Visiting a prison for a period of time to be able to write

about it is obviously not the same as actually living or working in it,² but if the visits happen regularly enough and over a long enough period, the ethnographic fieldworker will be able to carve out a position for herself or himself and interact as a proper (albeit temporary) participant in the field. This means that ethnography in practice in many respects will look and feel like “normal social interaction”—the kinds of everyday meetings between people we all, as human beings, are familiar with. This has been seen both as ethnography’s greatest strength and its most damning weakness. Critics argue that ethnography is nothing more than subjective and anecdotal storytelling, true only from a specific point of view; a kind of highbrow journalism that no one actually reads. Proponents focus on the strengths, arguing that ethnography should be the method of choice if one is interested in the situated social reproduction of meaning, of selves and in describing events and processes as they are understood and negotiated by the people actually living them. Ethnography can be used to explore

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and analyze the interconnectedness between acts, meaning, social position, and wider situation.

Even proponents must admit, however, that the critics are right when they claim that ethnographic fieldwork is a dirty and messy way of doing research, characterized by a lack of a proper external vantage point outside the cultural web that is the object of research.³ Ethnographic research proposals rarely look much like the finished products. At times, the ethnographer will struggle to just barely keep her or his head above water in a dizzying stream of strange and foreign impressions. R. W. Connell (2002) laments the fact that ethnography for such reasons is an endeavor that may sound simple enough on paper (it's just what people normally do, right?), but that it is very difficult to do it well in practice.

These difficulties often disappear in published ethnographic monographs. Even researchers who acknowledge that ethnographies may (or should) be "messy texts" (Marcus, 1998) must weigh complexity and "mess" against legibility, publishability, and a mounting word count. In a recent article in *Qualitative Inquiry*, Yvonne Jewkes (2012) argues that the problematic tendency to "tidy up" the finished research reports and make it more of a "monologue" (Bakhtin, 2003) than the messy polyphonic hotchpotch texts that would be closer to the lived experience of fieldwork, is particularly acute within the subfield of prison ethnography. Any kind of ethnography will always include autoethnographic dimensions; ethnographies are always to some extent also stories about the ethnographer.⁴ According to Jewkes, prison ethnographers tend to remove much or all of the autoethnographic elements from their finished texts, making prison ethnography look easier and more comfortable than it often is, or, even worse, they end up putting the entire research process into a textual black box. This is problematic for two reasons. First, Jewkes claims that this is doing a disservice to budding researchers who could have learned from our mistakes. I agree with Jewkes; it should be a goal to not "pull up the ladder" after oneself. Second, in reflexively self-conscious ethnographic accounts, it is important to disclose one's autoethnographic roles as these are vital for readers trying to make sense of the text. Put differently, ethnographies with these reflexive elements removed are more difficult to make proper sense of. Jewkes argues, and again, I agree, that by making the autoethnographic elements of the prison experience more explicit, we could make a new kind of conversation possible. Such a conversation may in turn make life somewhat easier for fledgling prison researchers. It may also improve our own texts.

I have chosen to go against the grain of academic genre conventions in this article (e.g., those demanding that one should avoid the use of personal pronouns and remove the researcher from the finished text). As argued by Liebling in the quote above, the ethnographer is herself or himself of

vital importance for the research end result. Given ethnography's grounding in real social interaction between actual people, suspending yourself from the finished article could actually be considered to be a bit dishonest. For many ethnographers, keeping the researcher–author visible in the text is not only a matter of academic style; it is a question of being true to a specific epistemology. This is why I have chosen to use a more personal style than what is common in many academic texts in the following.

With this starting point, I would like to tell a story about a research project in three acts, focusing on my own lived experiences of doing fieldwork. The purpose is not to write about myself and my experiences for their own sake, to engage in biographism or meaningless navel gazing, nor is it to simply share amusing (and embarrassing) anecdotes from the field. By writing myself explicitly into the world I have investigated, I hope to take Jewkes' challenge seriously and explore how emotional and experiential autoethnographic accounts may be integrated into and further the wider ethnographic analysis in ways that make both the everyday life in a prison and the everyday life as a prison researcher visible in new ways.

Context and Research Methods

The following is based on ethnographic fieldwork over a period of 1 year (May 2007–May 2008) in two connected prison wings for remand (pre-trial) prisoners in Oslo prison, Norway's largest prison. I was given free access to the two wings, could come and go as I pleased, and talk to any prisoner I wanted to without going through the officers first. Conversations mainly took place in the small common area shared by the two wings, or in the privacy of a cell together with one or two prisoners. I wore civilian clothes, an ID card identifying me as a university employee, a single visible key to get me between wings, and a visible assault alarm on my belt. Having no official role in the prison and no cell keys, I spent most of my time just hanging around the wings, drinking coffee, playing pool, and talking with anyone interested about whatever they would want to talk about. What Geertz (1998) has called *deep hanging out*—"localized long-term close-in vernacular field research" (p. 69)—worked well as a research strategy in an environment where people have a lot of time on their hands and not a lot to do with it, although it did provoke a lot of jokes about my seemingly endless break from "real work."

The fieldwork is part of a wider study of the mutually constitutive relationship between forms of power, practices of resistance, and subjectivity in prison. Very briefly put, when someone is put in a prison, an effect is that he becomes (or rather, is positioned as) a *prisoner*. The crux of the argument is that most prisoners in various ways try to symbolically make themselves into something else. Various practices

of resistance (understood in the broadest sense) are tools prisoners may use when they reposition themselves as someone who manages to resist, someone not totally stripped of autonomy and agency, even though they happen to be in prison. By participating in and engaging in the prison's power relationships in certain ways, prisoners try to make themselves into resisting subjects; active opponents of the prison regime (and, in that sense at least, *free men*), not

passive objects of state power. These resistance practices have profound effects on the level of prisoners' ongoing renegotiation of subjectivity within the confines of the particular institution. What kinds of resistance practices that are acceptable and valued in what ways in a specific prison, is part of the cultural web that is continuously being reproduced in that prison, and thus something that must be studied specifically.

Act I: Trying to Get My Head Above Water

It's Monday morning in May 2007. I'm on my way to Oslo prison for the very first time. The half-queasy feeling in my stomach and my clammy hands tell me that I'm nervous. What will come of this? How will they react to my presence? It feels like a lot is riding on this first day.

One of the officers working wing four arrive to welcome me. I've met her before, at the information meeting when I presented the research proposal. I'm pleased to see a familiar face. We walk up some stairs, and into the prison proper. We move slowly; she has to open the heavy metal doors, wait for me to go through, and then close and lock the door behind us. It feels strange to attach the black assault alarm she hands me to my belt. She smiles at my civilian striped cloth belt and concludes: "Well, that won't do." Soon I'm given a new black leather belt with a sturdy buckle, prison officer style.

I'm finally properly outfitted and we take the elevator up to the wing. It's under midday lockdown and the cell doors are (thankfully) closed at the moment. I follow my guide into the officer only work and break area in the middle of the wing and meet the rest of the staff on duty. One officer is at the desk, busy with the computer, the rest are seated leisurely in the break area behind the office. They all seem nice, and they're all interested, but none of them have heard anything about my arrival. So much for the information letter I've sent in advance. It was supposed to be distributed and posted both in the office and out on the wings, but it's nowhere to be seen. "Who are you, then? Are you going to start working here or what?" I start on the first of many explanations.

The lockdown is over, and the officers let eight or ten prisoners out of their cells and into the common area. I'm watching things unfold from the relative safety of the officer room doorway. Five prisoners have started their workout over in the small weight training area. I've suddenly become aware of the fact that all the officers have mysteriously disappeared. I feel all alone. I retreat back into the officer room, flip absentmindedly through an old newspaper on the table. Come on, have I come here to study the inside of this room? What am I, the reluctant ethnographer? From experience, I know I have to make the first move in a situation like this. And I know that it can be extremely awkward. Why did I choose to do this? Why do this for a living in the first place? I don't really like people that much.

I get it together and walk as calmly and suavely as I can manage over to the weight training area. I try to make eye contact with someone on the way over to ease the first contact. I fail. I pick a prisoner randomly anyway and try to introduce myself. I stretch out a hand. He looks at it. Then he looks up at me: "Do you speak English?" A poor first attempt, but OK, I can manage that. I introduce myself again, and from the corner of my eye, I can see that the other four prisoners are paying close attention. The guy I'm talking to makes no attempt at communication. Instead, an angry shout comes from my right:

Prisoner 1: What the fuck? Are you saying you're police?

TU (Thomas Ugelvik) Eh, no? No, no! I'm not police!

My thoughts have kicked into high gear. I didn't say that I'm a police officer, did I? That wasn't what I said? Why did I tell them that I work for the police?

Prisoner 1: Sure! You said it yourself, you're police. I'm going to fucking tell everybody that they shouldn't have anything to do with you.

The prisoner that has, in fact, started a sort of conversation with me, is staring straight into my face, aggressively. I picture a research project in ruins. He turns suddenly on his heels and marches over to the sofa area in the other end of the room and sits. I decide to follow him and sit down on the sofa opposite him. At least he said something. Behind me I hear the workout recommencing.

I spend the next hour or so trying to convince him that I am, in fact, not an undercover police officer. The more I protest, the more certain he is that I'm lying to him.

Prisoner 1: You know what, I'm totally convinced that you're police, no matter what you're saying. You're here to gather information.

TU: Yes, well, that's true in a sense, but not for the police, I'm a researcher; I work for the University, I'm going to write a book about what it's like to live here.

Prisoner 1: Oh, so you're writing a book, are you? What are you going to use that book for, then? Who will read it? The police will. That's not helping, is it?

The conversation moves into a series of tests. He says things and watches my reactions. After a little while, I think I can feel that he's easing up a bit. The questions take on more of a joking quality. Another prisoner walks past. He looks at me and tells me with a huge grin on his face:

Prisoner 2: Don't listen to this guy, he's full of shit, heh heh.

Other prisoners join in and participate in the conversation (or, better put, the examination). After a while, my examiner lets me know that he now believes that I may not be a police officer after all, but he's still not sure. Another prisoner interferes and tries to make him see the gravity of the situation:

Prisoner 1: I'm just telling everybody you're police to see what will happen, see how you'll react. See how tough you are.

Prisoner 3: But you shouldn't do that, someone might really hurt him in here.

Prisoner 1: I know, that's why I'm doing it, heh heh, to see how tough he is.

TU: You know what, I'm really not that tough.

Prisoner 1: We'll see about that. We'll see, heh heh.

Entering the prison for the first time was scary, of course, but also exciting. How would I be greeted? Would I be accepted? Where would I fit in? From the first minute of the first day of fieldwork, I entered into negotiations about my position in the prison and my proper place in the perpetual struggle between (various factions of) prisoners and officers. The first day was awkward and somewhat overwhelming. Looking back, I would describe it as an extremely chaotic mess of strange and often rather unfriendly people making a lot of loud and unexpected noise. One can become acutely self-aware in these situations. As Jewkes (2012) puts it: "[E]thnography may be accompanied by a psychological anxiety that demands a continuous management of self when in the presence of those studied" (p. 67). On the positive side, prisons are

only rarely really dangerous places. I never had to prove my toughness, but I didn't know it at the time. Luckily, I was too busy to really worry about it; I just tried to manage the awkwardness and find a way to smile. But inside, I was anxious and I really hoped that I would be accepted before long. Evening lockdown came as a welcome relief on this first day (I have to admit it). At the end of the day, I was nonetheless relatively optimistic, all things considered. After all, I had managed to strike up a conversation. I was also totally exhausted.

Act 2: Struggling to Fit In

Who am I? And who and what did "I" become in Oslo prison? Over the next few weeks, I gradually became a part of a world

that I understood better and better. Through interaction, I slowly created my own position or, perhaps rather “took on a persona,” as part of the everyday life of the prison, a place peopled with both prisoners and officers who, thankfully, often also chose to interact with me. This new and unique position, partly included in, partly on the outside of the day-to-day life of the institution, was the result of a process of negotiation that continued throughout the 1-year fieldwork period. For an ethnographer, describing this process is important, particularly from the perspective of reflexivity. One can always observe anything only from a particular point of view. What I got exposed to, what sort of conversations I had, what sort of practices I was able to participate in, in fact my entire data material, is a result of my specific position as a fieldworker in the field site that is the prison wings in question.

Prison researchers have often done their research from some sort of official position within the institution. Clemmer (1940) interviewed prisoners as an official in-house sociologist (his official title was “sociologist-actuary”). Coggeshall (2004) did his fieldwork “on the side” while he was teaching anthropology in the prison’s education department. Mathiassen (2004) returned as a researcher to the prison where she had previously worked as a clinical psychologist. Prisoners have also written about their prison experiences. The most common genre is the prison biography or the collected prison letters (e.g., Berkman, 1999; Jackson, 1971; Kusnetsov, 1979; Peltier, 1999), but prisoners have also written academically about the prison (Galtung, 1959; Lauesen, 1998; Ross & Richards, 2003; cf. Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005).

In frustration and anger, a prisoner has broken his cell window. An officer enters his cell to have the prescribed serious talk with him. Almost jokingly, the prisoner tries to explain the shattered window:

How should I know what happened? Somebody must have thrown something from the outside, or maybe a bird flew through it?

Never say anything is the fundamental rule for prisoners loyal to the prisoner community. The prisoner admitted nothing to the officer, but his explanation was obviously not believed. Dangerous kamikaze birds became a standing joke for the officers the following week or so. The comical and the very serious go hand in hand here, however: Prisoners who say the wrong sort of thing to the wrong people become “snitches.” Officers, however, risk creating political scandal if the wrong sort of information reaches the wrong sort of journalist. Both sides in this game risk something when they decide to talk to an outsider. And there I was, in the middle of it all, with a somewhat unclear status, looking for information. In this context it was imperative to respect the rules of both the prisoner and officer societies to the best of my abilities.

When I arrived at Oslo prison as a university employee, I lacked such an already defined position in the field. My presence and behavior lacked pre-defined meaning for both prisoners and officers. They had to actively make me “legible” according to some sort of understandable register. So I was observing the field, but I was also being observed. As a criminologist, I was in a sense representing a discipline that, in the Norwegian context at least, historically has been synonymous with prison critique and an abolitionist stance (Christie, 2007; Mathiesen, 1974, 2006). But I had also worked as a researcher for the prison service earlier in my career and published more evaluation-type research. Early on in the fieldwork period, both associations concerned me. Prisoners and officers alike seemed somewhat skeptical or at least slightly cautious in my presence, albeit in slightly different ways. Many prisoners initially saw me as a sort of representative or puppet of the prison system. Officers wanted to know more about my research, about my department in general and whether *that weirdo [Nils] Christie is still going on about that pain business*. Over the first couple of weeks, I had to do a lot of work to try to resist or at least nuance various forms of presupposed values and allegiances.

The symbolic demarcation line separating prisoners and officer structures everything that goes on in a prison. Both groups define themselves and each other in relation to it. Prisoners and officers both have rules governing the passing of information across this line (Carrabine & Longhurst, 1998; Lindberg, 2005). These rules are an integrated part of life on the wings to the extent that jokes are made about them:

Trust must be built and earned. Initially my trustworthiness was tested several times. Some prisoners started to demonstrate illicit food-making practices—a little at a time—so see whether I would tell the officers about it (Ugelvik, 2011). Of course, I didn’t. One prisoner asked me one tired morning whether I knew an associate professor at my department, and gave a made-up name. I told him that he had made a mistake; I didn’t know anyone by that name, and I certainly know all my colleagues. The prisoner smiled and let me understand that I had passed his test.

For prison officers, I represented a security risk, not least when it came to my own security. The officers sometimes explicitly took on responsibility for my safety and told me not to do something because it might be dangerous. Well, not *really* dangerous, they quickly added, but they were,

after all, responsible for my well-being. When I visited prisoners in the privacy of their cells, the officers would sometimes come by and peek in to make sure that everything was fine. The cell door was supposed to be unlocked in these instances, but sometimes the door was locked with me inside by mistake. One time, the prisoner and I decided not to use the intercom and tell the officers about it right away. When an officer finally found me, still in the middle of an interesting conversation, an hour and a half later, he was quite embarrassed, but my host got a good laugh out of it. The fact that the officers felt responsible for my safety played to my advantage. When female temporary officers half your size come looking for you to see that you're all right, you're clearly not an undercover police officer. The fact that the officers initially looked out for me clearly marked me as a somewhat unpractical and bookish "academic" type, and thus nothing to be afraid of.

This was a great asset for the fieldwork early on, even if it created its own problems. Several prisoners made clear that they saw me as not entirely up to scratch in the masculinity department, and that something needed to be done. Being accepted as "one of the lads" has its price, and fieldwork also always has a bodily dimension (Coffey, 1999). A few prisoners soon started a regime of training and testing to make a proper

man out of me. Some of them decided to try to surprise or scare me either verbally or by trying to sneak up behind me and either trip me or jab a finger into my kidney area. Such "attacks" are common among prisoners, so this was in fact a sign that I was being included. Suddenly, two strong arms grab you from behind and lift you into the air. At such moments, you're supposed to react in a certain "correct" way. Initially, they told me that I seemed a bit anxious and unsure of myself. After having been told that I should under no circumstances avert my gaze if someone looked at me, they gave me credit for having improved. At the end of the fieldwork period, I could easily demonstrate that surprise attacks didn't faze me at all. I stared back, cold, and aloof but with half a smile, and got recognition. At home, my wife told me that I had started to stand with my feet too wide apart, and that it looked ridiculous.

Luckily, I was spared the harder end of the continuum of inclusionary rough-housing practices. No one ever hit me hard in upper arm, for instance, a not uncommon sign of friendship and hierarchy in Oslo prison. Again, I was positioned somewhere between prisoners and officers—no officer would condone any sort of physical test regime, but I still wasn't respected fully as a fellow prisoner.

My body was also tested more literally. A prisoner called me over to the workout area one morning, to gauge my strength:

Prisoner: Come on, now, let's see. You're a big guy.

I want to get out of it, try with feeble excuses. I just arrived, am not ready yet. But there's no way around this, not if I don't want to lose face completely. A few other prisoners are watching me curiously while doing their workout. I walk up to the old and withered white exercise machine and grab the short black handle. The weights move a little bit, but I can't complete the movement. It's too heavy. It's embarrassing.

TU: No, this just isn't for me, I think [smiling]

Staring at me, the prisoner is slowly shaking his head. He feels my arms through my sweater.

Prisoner: No, this isn't good. This is just soft.

The other prisoners present look away in pity and embarrassment.

Prisoner: But here's something. This is a bit better [feeling my triceps]. Look here, do this instead.

My triceps curls are a bit better: But I have to give up after completing five or six repetitions. The mood around the workout area instantly improves a bit. The prisoner takes my place and does about 20 reps with the same weights to show me how it's done.

Prisoner: What, you're about 92 kilos? You should be stronger. It's not good.

TU [grasping at straws now]: No, you're right, I have been neglecting my upper body. I just work my legs most of the time. I ride my bike a lot.

The prisoner checks my legs. He feels and squeezes my thighs and lower legs thoroughly.

Prisoner: Well, that's not too bad. This is a lot better. But you've got to work your upper body as well. It's not good, you're spending way too much time in your office. What's your body going to look like when you're 40?

As a young man, I was expected to be able to hold my ground, at least to some extent. Some prisoners felt that my body made a promise it couldn't keep. One interpretation of these instances is that the helplessly bookish academic was put in his place in the hierarchy for all to see. Another, more positive understanding is that the prisoners gave me the opportunity to show everyone that I too am a man, even if I didn't quite look the part. Later, I also had to arm-wrestle an officer. I lost. A female researcher would probably not have been tested in quite the same way. So I was seen as a man, but not quite a proper one, an academic half-man in need of urgent assistance.

The position of wimp ascribed to me was uncomfortable at times. However, it opened an ethnographic window into the collective reproduction of masculine values in the prison culture. The challenges I had to try (and often fail) to answer gave insights into and data about the terms and limits of masculinity in prison. Prisoners are deprived of many of the usual avenues for performative demonstration of competence and agency. They are made passive and to a large extent unable to influence their surroundings in the ways that are meaningful in the outside world (Carrabine & Longhurst, 1998; Jewkes, 2005). This is an important part of the general cultural web context the prisoners are trying to understand and reconstruct themselves and each other within. Typical "grown up" decisions, from when to get up in the morning to what you will eat for dinner, are made for the prisoners, and whenever they want to do something, they have to ask an officer for permission. How can adult men retain their masculinity when they, as prisoners, are given less freedom than an average child of ten? The fact that I was positioned in the field as a specific person with a specific gendered body made the various strategies prisoners use to counter the emasculating effects of imprisonment directly observable. Of course, this made the stigma ascribed to my weak office body a lot easier to handle.

In sum, I did not just smoothly and effortlessly become an integrated part of the life on the wings. I had to actively struggle and work to fit in and capture a position as a "legible" and understandable part of the everyday life. In theory, this can be done appreciatively, through interaction that is "warm, caring, and empowering" and built on mutuality and egalitarianism, but the prison being what it is, it will also often have some more agonistic elements (Kvale, 2006; Vitus, 2008). Learning to know the field and finding a place in it may mean that one has to engage and struggle with it. For me, the awkwardness of the first day didn't immediately subside; if anything, it became more complex and

multifaceted over the first few weeks. Thankfully, so did my coping strategies, and these are in themselves valuable data sources. In my experience, being a prison researcher means that you need to prepare for some level of uncomfortable interaction. Struggling with the field and with the positions you are being put in might be frustrating and tiring when one is in the thick of it, but it sometimes makes for great data. Consensus is more comfortable in general, but conflict and confrontation will reveal other sides of the institution and the everyday life therein.

Act 3: Traversing the Minefield

After having spent some time on the wings and proven myself in all sorts of tests, I went from being a stranger and an outsider to being a sort of insider, a liminal in-between figure that nevertheless belonged on the wings. As Jewkes (2012) puts it,

The most alien of environments become familiar over time, and, while sporadic dramas can punctuate prison life, for the most part, the rhythms and routines of penal institutions have an ordinary, repetitive nature that makes them relatively easy to become accustomed to. (p. 61)

When the awkwardness fades, you're entering a new phase. This is not necessarily a bad thing—being accustomed to a situation is not the same as "going native" in the classical anthropological sense; again, the prison being what it is, I don't think that going too far in this direction is a common problem in prison research. Becoming part of the field, feeling at home, and knowing what to say and do (and what not to say and do), means that you have successfully carved out a place for yourself. To a certain extent, you have been accepted, and you have accepted the people you have met. You may not be fully at home in the prison's cultural web, but you are a regular visitor who "speaks prison" fluently, even if it isn't your first language. Friendships may have been forged, but not necessarily (Jewkes, 2012).

When this happens, new kinds of data become available. I was gradually included in both the prisoners' and the officers' (more or less) symmetrical informal joking relationships (Gundelach, 2000; Mathiesen, 1965; Nielsen, 2011). It felt like a great victory when the prisoner who gave me a hard time on my first day later greeted me by reiterating the "funny" rumor he made up, about me being an undercover police officer, and I was able to retort in a manner not only accepted but also valued in the prisoner culture:

Prisoner: Well, well, look who's here, it's our resident bookworm. The police will be hanging out with us again today, yeah?

TU: Come on, police officers don't read books. I'm either a bookworm or I'm a police officer. Which is it? You've got to make up your mind!

Prisoner: Hah, hah, hah!

Quick and easy banter is highly valued on the wings, both between prisoners, between officers, and in the interaction between the two groups. To be teased, and to tease a little back, is to be accepted; this goes for Oslo prison as, for instance, on Bali (Geertz, 1973a). When I discovered that my picture on the information poster I finally had posted was decorated with devils' horns and a beard drawn on in pen, I took it as a good sign.

As described above, I found Oslo prison to be a politicized field with a clear demarcation line between prisoners and officers (Becker, 1967). The "perpetual conflict" (Lindberg, 2005; Sparks, Hay, & Bottoms, 1996) was plain for all to see, but it felt more subdued and "muted" than the situation experienced by, for example, Jacobs (1977) in Stateville prison. He found himself thrown into an unstable situation with rumors, factions, mutual suspicion, and more or less open conflicts laying there like hidden mines in a minefield he had to traverse. The perpetual conflict in Oslo prison, although equally real and important to take seriously, was a bit more implicit and indirect. It was an institution in cold war.

Given this situation, I had to try to navigate the (mine) field carefully, without taking sides. Alienating either part of the conflict could close doors (quite literally) and create problems for my research project.⁵ As a result, to some extent I tried to become the "political eunuch" described by Vidich:

He [the participant-observer] is socially marginal to the extent that he measures his society as a non-involved outsider and avoids committing his loyalties and allegiances to segments of it. This is not hypocrisy, but rather, as Howe has noted of Stendahl, "it is living a ruse." Being both a participant and an observer is the strategy of deceiving the society to study it and wooing the society to live in it. (quoted in Jacobs, 1977, p. 270n)

This strategy came with its challenges. Prisoners and officers both tried to actively "recruit" me. When there weren't enough officers on duty for some reason, someone invariably told me—jokingly—to go find a uniform and make myself useful. In busy periods, officers would sigh loudly and ask each other whether it is too much to ask the lazy researcher to answer a phone once in a while.⁶ The prisoners for their part let me listen in when they shared the resistance narratives about "stupid officers" known from prison research everywhere (e.g., Crewe, 2007; Jewkes, 2005). They shook hands with me prisoner style and told me that I was one of them. And when they talked about who

had served the longest time on the wing, they included me as well: *Nine months? Fuck, Thomas, you have been here just as long as me. When is your release date?*

But even though both prisoners and officers tried to include me in their communities, I obviously did not fit properly in any group. As a prison ethnographer you're reminded each and every day (as you leave your key in the automatic key safe and leave the prison, knowing that you can come and go as you please) that you are member of a "group of one" (Jacobs, 1977). Rather than real invitations, I understood these light-hearted attempts at integration as signs of the fact that I at this point was truly welcome, that both prisoners and officers welcomed my company.

Neutrality as a research strategy is very difficult to manage perfectly in real life (which is not to say that one should not attempt it—I would do it again). As a visiting researcher, you will often be pulled into everyday conflicts and ascribed prison-specific labels and categories whether you want to or not. And as an ethnographer, to some extent, you want to be pulled in, to be made a part. It sometimes happened that the officers wanted my expert opinion. I was once asked what would be the best way to manage—*criminologically speaking*—the proposed new young offenders wing. Being asked to "diagnose" prisoners I had known for months felt wrong in all sorts of ways. Wanting to stay neutral, I decided to contribute only academic gobbledegook to the conversation. The officers present got their prejudices about lofty and useless academics confirmed in the process.⁷

After getting my head above water and a bit of initial struggling, I experienced my fieldwork period as an attempt at walking on a moving tightrope with two groups of spectators continuously trying to test your balance. The problem is that being made a part of a field in perpetual conflict inevitably will challenge the quest for neutrality. The already politicized minefield demanded side-taking. If you want to tread only on the narrow lines in-between, you need good balance. You should also prepare for missteps, as they will inevitably happen. Sometimes, it felt like I—rather than being an expert tightrope walker—was standing with one foot on the pier and one in a boat that was slowly drifting away. A few times, officers in conflict with prisoners I knew well deliberately used me as "lightning rod." One officer told to me after an ad hoc meeting to resolve a conflict with a prisoner: *It's amazing how much more amenable he is when you're around.* Prisoners also used my presence strategically to influence the officers. One told me near the end of the fieldwork that he had made a

point of calling the officers on the intercom while I visited his cell. He felt that the officers were better at remembering what he asked for with me as an unsuspecting witness.

Conclusion

The three phases or “acts” described in this article—being able to cope, then struggling to find one’s place, and then, finally, being a part of the field on one’s own terms—are perhaps part of any process when someone is learning to do something new. The three stages also bring with them their own, specific forms of insights, making different forms of ethnographic knowledge possible.

Prison ethnography may be conceptualized as a form of translation (Cohen & Taylor, 1976, 1981). The prisoners’ and officers’ thoughts, words, deeds, and values are tied to and products of a particular context and the cultural web that is continuously being reproduced there. Making this cultural web understandable outside the specific context is the bottom line of the ethnographic project. From an external perspective, the meanings and purposes ascribed to acts may be difficult to spot. Acts may, simply, look meaningless when divorced from their original contexts. According to Geertz (1973b), the fundamental purpose of any ethnographic exploration is facilitating understanding. From this perspective, successful ethnographies may demystify and humanize, and, in a certain sense of the word, normalize:

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these? (Geertz, 1973b, p. 16)

The three phases detailed in this article bring different forms of insights to the ethnographer’s table. Feelings of nervousness and being uncomfortable on the first day will provide valuable insights into the experience of being new in the field. Making mistakes and saying the wrong things show you what values are important. Being tested means being taken seriously, but it is also a cultural practice. Finally, being included is professionally pleasing and also more comfortable than the initial stages, but, more importantly, it also gives you an opportunity to reflect on the rules and modes of inclusion. In all cases, the researcher’s lived experiences, including her or his situated emotions and feelings, are the central methodological tools available to ethnographers. This should be acknowledged and used to the fullest both while in the field and when writing up the research afterward. But that is another story.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authorship and publication of this article has been funded by the European Research Council (ERC Starting Grant).

Notes

1. “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973b, p. 5).
2. Both living and working in a prison might well be combined with ethnographic exploration of the institution, of course, but the resulting complex researcher positions (the prisoner-ethnographer and the prison officer-ethnographer) will create specific problems that will not be addressed here.
3. “We ground things, now, on a moving earth. There is no longer any place of overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life, no Archimedean point from which to represent the world. Mountains are in constant motion. So are islands: for one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures” (Clifford, 1986, p. 22). This may be seen as true for research in general, regardless of genre, many ethnographers would probably retort.
4. Indeed, in a certain sense, this will go for any text in any genre, given that a text always will have been written by a specific pen or on a specific keyboard in a specific context, but that is not the point here.
5. This strategy of methodological neutrality has some important research ethics implications that will not be discussed here (cf. Becker, 1967; Jewkes, 2012; Liebling, 2001; Sim, 2003).
6. These examples were both jokes; I never experienced being asked to do real prison officer work, with the obvious exception of remembering to lock doors between wings as I moved through the prison, unlike Holmberg (2001), who studied the prison in his spare time while he worked as a teacher in a prison in the American Midwest. As a teacher, he was expected to be able to participate in riot control should a crisis occur. After a mandatory marksmanship test had shown that he, despite being a convinced pacifist, was a better shot than most of the officers, he was assigned a rifle. The prisoners gave him respect after learning about his skills. The officers did not appreciate being beaten by a civilian.
7. Prisoners and officers shared these prejudices against academics. I became the brunt of many jokes about bespectacled professorial windbags. My only allies in this respect were the students—often law students—hired as temporary officers.

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