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## Reading difference differently?: identity, epistemology and prison ethnography

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## Identity, Epistemology and Ethnography

The epistemological concerns which have preoccupied cultural, anthropological and sociological ethnographic practice in the last three decades (see for example Clifford and Marcus 1986), appear to have barely penetrated the field of prison ethnography in the UK. Prison ethnographies have, for the most part, paid scant attention to the 'crisis of representation' that has animated those disciplines, and barely engaged with either the 'postmodernist turn' or the 'autobiographical turn'. This is not to suggest, however, that methodological debates regarding researcher and prisoner positionality have been entirely absent (see for example Genders and Player 1989, 1995, Bosworth 1999, Liebling 2001).

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This paper attends to these issues more comprehensively, drawing on two prison ethnographies of a medium security adult male prison and a young offenders' institution which sought to understand prisoners' identities and their impact on social relations. It is argued that the relative neglect of researcher subjectivities and positionalities impoverishes the appreciation of difference and diversity. To foreground this, the paper begins with an overview of epistemological and methodological debates which have influenced ethnographic practice.

### Ethnographic Traditions I - Insider/Outsider debates

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Methodological debates about Insider-Outsider dynamics are situated within a modernist discourse of a positivist epistemology which seeks a single, universal truth. Outlined in a classic paper, Merton (1972) argued that disputed knowledge claims arise in increasingly fractured societies in which minority social and cultural groups challenge the orthodox intellectual claims of the status quo.

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The Insider position posits that only those from within the ascribed status group have access to understanding their cultural practices and norms. Thus, for example, only black people can possess a genuine understanding of the social realities of black feelings, values, behaviours and cultural experiences. At the same time, because of asymmetrical social relations within white and black society in America, black scholars (as Outsiders) may be sensitised to mainstream culture and social structures because they have been disadvantaged by them, thus allowing them a kind of privileged quasi-Insider standing. Conversely, it is argued, Insider positionality can engender a myopic view of social reality, whereas the Outsider can objectively enquire of social groups' significant practices or experiences because they are unfamiliar, as captured in Simmel's (1950) notion of the 'stranger'.

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Such sweeping claims for Insiderism have been easily refuted with the counter-claim of essentialism. Indeed, Merton (1972) himself recognised considerable heterogeneity within social groups, that social groups borrow ideas from each other rather than them being held only by one group, and that individuals have a number of interrelated statuses and not a singular one which solely defines their behaviour and perspectives. Merton also acknowledged shifts in status as Insiders become Outsiders and vice-versa (see also Alexander 2004). In essence, Merton (1972: 33) recognised that ‘the balance sheet for Outsider observers resembles that for Insider observers, both having their distinctive assets and liabilities.’

The erstwhile dilemmas of Insider-Outsider positionalities have been only partly usurped by postmodernists’ rejection of binary oppositional categories, meta-narratives, and the chimera of universal truths. These challenge the traditional ethnographic possibilities of narrating a singular external reality. Postmodernist influence in ethnography, in order to avoid privileging the ethnographer’s voice, has been represented through polyvocal dialogue, textual and visual forms, sometimes with no external authorial evaluation or ordering.

Researcher positionality remains firmly on the methodological and epistemological agenda, however, and there is now greater recognition of the unproductive effects of reductionist approaches which foreground a single identity, say race/ethnicity, over others such as gender, class, nationality and sexuality (Coloma 2008). More commonly, intersectional understandings predominate, recognising multidimensional subject positions. There is acknowledgement too of the solidity of subject positions but also of their relational, contingent, fragmentary, and continually-being-formed nature (Hall 1997, Arber 2000).

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#### *Ethnographic Traditions II - Standpoint Epistemologies and Reflexivity*

Alongside these developments has been feminists’ critique of male-dominated knowledge production. Feminist theorists promoted the importance of producing knowledge from the situated experiences of women, so that a gendered understanding, for example, comes only from representing the standpoint of women and their socially structured and materially defined oppressive realities (see for example Harstock 1983, Harding 1987, and in criminology: Cain 1990). Such accounts were themselves subsequently problematised for failing to acknowledge multiplicities of experience structured through the stratifying axes of race/ethnicity and class. What was required was an intersectional understanding recognising the need to avoid compartmentalising subjectivities (Hill Collins 1990, Rice 1990) or assume a simplistic hierarchy of power relations (Bar-On 1993). Standpoint

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epistemologies were also increasingly recognised as themselves discursive formations which also tended toward an absolutist conception of truth (Hekman 1997).

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A route out of this epistemological cul-de-sac has been to promote the importance of reflexive understanding, which literally involves a 'turning back on oneself' (Aull Davies 1999: 4) as ethnographers see themselves as centrally implicated in what is observed in the field, but also in the topics they have selected for study, and in the analysis and writing up of research findings. In this way the ethnographic field is regarded as internal rather than external; it is constituted by the ethnographer (Ely *et al.* 1997) who must also reflect on the social contexts of research subjects' lived experiences.

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Reflexive approaches are not without their problems, however. Lal (1996) points to the ways in which women's studies' scholars invoke the obligatory mantra of self-positioning without engaging with their positionality and its impact on the interpretive process - what Alexander (2004: 138) refers to as 'reflexivity-by-rote'. Similarly, Maynard (2002), suggests that reflexivity is a laudable aim but hard to operationalise and achieve in practice. Such a perspective also ultimately runs the risk of becoming solely inward-focused as the ethnographer engages in an infinite, narcissistic regress of self-conscious self-interrogations. Another danger is to privilege the voice of the ethnographer over research subjects, a key criticism of the 'autobiographical turn' in anthropology (Foley 2002, Coffey 1999). Attention to authorial 'voice' raises complex dilemmas concerning a tendency, on the one hand, to ventriloquise or 'speak for' silenced voices and on the other, of a form of textual laryngitis in which the author's voice is apparently silent, though everywhere present and nowhere identifiable. In this context the voices of research subjects are offered as positional contextualisations of an otherwise absent authorial presence. (Skeggs 2004) is concerned that reflexivity offers little more than another recuperation of class, the re-making of working class identities in the image of bourgeois sensibilities of 'self-possession'. Reflexivity is criticised by Skeggs (2004: 128) for providing a simple panacea that glosses an uncritical reading of power at work in the making of 'selves', as if 'the problems of power, privilege and perspective can be dissolved by inserting one's self into the account and proclaiming therefore that reflexivity was practiced; where, in fact, it was just talking about one's own experience from one's own perspective.'

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For us the attraction of reflexivity lies not in confessional or testimonial exhortation but in its capacity to acknowledge researchers as active participants whose identities, like those of research subjects, may be variously shaped by powerful hierarchies of race/ethnicity, gender and class. The

*practice* of explicitly working through these dynamics reveals how our own positions and interests are, sometimes discretely, imposed throughout the research process, influencing the questions we ask, the ones we don't, who we interview and who we don't, how we interview, how we listen and how we don't, and ultimately how we understand (Hertz 1997). Reflexivity offers a guide to sociological practice somewhat immunized against 'the single, central, dominant..., quasi-divine, point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers' (Bourdieu 1999: 3).

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## Positionality and Prison Ethnography

Being granted access to two prisons and being welcomed by prison Governors, despite the inclusion of a former prisoner (Rod) in the research team, contrasts starkly with the situation in the US where prison ethnographies are rarely conducted and even more rarely institutionally embraced (Wacquant 2002, Simon 2000, Morgan 2002). In Canada too, West (cited in Comack 2008: 13) indicates that as prison populations there rise to unprecedented levels there is an 'astounding dearth of empirically grounded, descriptive material on how prisoners in Canadian penitentiaries actually live, experience, understand and organize their lives'. Even if, in the past, prison research in the UK has been far from free of institutional obstruction (Cohen and Taylor 1981), the more recent research environment accompanying the relentless growth of the domestic prison population has been nothing if not commensurate. The North American scenario seems remote in comparison to the many, varied and fine-grained accounts of contemporary penal interiors in the UK.

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Nonetheless, these insightful studies often present accounts of relatively anonymous, albeit sympathetic, Outsiders looking in, as if their positionality and biographies were marginal to the perspectives they generate. There is obviously a degree of inevitability of Outsider status in prison ethnographies, but methodological accounts of the research process tend to be confined to afterwords or appendices, rather than embedded in the ethnographic text (Pickering 2001 but see Bosworth 1999). In one of the most recent, comprehensive and rich accounts of prison life, Crewe (2009: 488) indicates a 'reluctance to foreground myself in the analysis, not because my identity was irrelevant to the study, but because my identity was not what the study was about.' While this is suggestive of the dualism that polarizes subjectivity against objective method, we do not want to deny the difficulties of reflexivity for the lone prison researcher. Much of the approach we develop in this paper arises from circumstantial opportunities that continually exposed the significance of the class, ethnicity and gender differences we explore here, but these may be less accessible for a lone researcher. Moreover, we have been

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persuaded by Duneier's (2004: 103) suggestion to take as our starting point that 'a different social position can have a serious effect on one's work, and one can do better work by taking them very seriously.'

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#### *Methodological and Analytical Approach*

Our study of Rochester Young Offenders' Institution and Maidstone Category C Prison in Kent, South-East England set out to explore neglected questions of how ethnicity and identity shape the social relations of sentenced men in prison. It involved two eight-month periods of fieldwork, between 2006 and 2008, in which we spent time among prisoners on the wings, in workshops and education classes, and during association, sports, visits and worship. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 110 prisoners. Slightly over half the sample was drawn from contacts made during observational work and the remainder were randomly selected from the prison roll, in both cases stratified to reflect the demographics of the prison population in relation to ethnicity, nationality and faith.

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In this paper we attempt to illustrate the significance of the self to prison ethnography, by highlighting the ways in which our biographical histories and composite identities directly affected field relationships and interactions, but were also *inherently* implicated in the analysis and writing stages of our research study. We have been convinced by Holland's (2007: 201) argument that our emotional experiences, memory, and subjectivity are inextricably entwined with the field, the prisoners' social world. As Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) assert, our thoughts and feelings about research participants and the research process should not be neglected or suppressed because they provide a lens through which to understand our data, particularly when informed by psychoanalytic concepts (see also Gelsthorpe 2007).

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Our approach has also been influenced by Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) invitation to reject the traditional ethnographer's belief that their text simply 'tells it as it is', instead seeking to understand the impact of defences against anxiety which affect research subjects' stories and their interpretation by researchers. These defences occur, often at an unconscious level, to protect the individual from painful emotional conflict. Hollway and Jefferson's approach to the study of fear of crime attempted to uncover contradictions, inconsistencies and 'irrational' explanations by taking account of researchers' anxieties, internal fantasies and feelings.

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Prisons are places of intensely managed emotions where institutional interests in formal order coincide and conflict with the raw exigencies of ontological survival in an alien and austere environment (cf. Cohen and Taylor 1981). The stress and anxiety imposed by closed and crowded living conditions, and

limited privacy, have to be endured daily by prisoners. It is therefore to be expected that anxiety defences are mutually at play for both researchers entering this world from the relative comforts of life outside, and prisoners themselves. Our fieldnotes record and reveal anxieties and defences, sometimes breached, sometimes only recognised in hindsight.

Walkerline *et al.*'s (2001) ethnography of young women's lives engaged with a similar emotional hinterland and developed a three-tier psycho-social analysis we have found helpful to adopt in our prison study. They identified the effects of gender and class operating at three discrete but contiguous levels. Firstly, their *Face Value Analysis* examined girls' stories for the plot, events and characters. Secondly, they analysed the *Unconscious Subject* elements of the girls' talk, focusing on projections, introjections, transferences, and omissions, silences, and contradictions. These refer to a variety of 'psychic defences' which protect the individual from consciously acknowledging anxious and painful feelings. They may be, instead, externalized and projected onto another individual ('projection'), internalized through the actions of others ('introjection'), pushed onto the researcher who experiences them directly ('transference'), excluded altogether ('omission') or referred to in contradictory ways. Cumulatively or specifically, the effect of these defences is to remove aspects of experience to a more invisible, unconscious, level where they remain largely unexplored. The third level, considered the impact of *Researcher-Subject Unconscious Dynamics* by interrogating the effects of the researchers' subjectivities on interpreting the girls' narratives.

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We attempt, albeit without psychoanalytical training, to apply this analytical framework, and the ideas of Hollway and Jefferson (2000), to prisoners' narratives, using two case studies. Our case studies are intended to place in the foreground the co-construction of our account of men's lives inside prison, the co-presence of ourselves, and the men we interviewed. The case studies we present here are not exceptional cases, and neither can they be taken as necessarily representative (Gomm *et al.* 2000). The case study approach we have adopted here allows for the 'working through of the entirety and complexity of the data as it applies to very particular contexts' (Gadd and Jefferson 2007a: 6). This commitment to exploring complexity in context is implicitly less conducive to the discussion of a wider sample of cases. The two selected cases were chosen because each presented us with almost unavoidable, *prima facie*, issues around ethnicity which surfaced differently for each researcher. A case study approach allowed us to subject these issues of apparently reading differences differently to greater scrutiny.

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Using contemporaneous notes on each interview, together with subsequent reflective post-transcription summaries prepared by both members of the research team, we have sought to expose, by exchanging notes, discussion, and recorded co-interviews, how the understandings we make of the identities and interactions of these prisoners are contingent upon our own biographies. Foremost among these are the way polarities of class ('working class'<sup>1</sup>/middle class), ethnicity (black/mixed race<sup>2</sup>/white) and gender (female/male) wove unexpected patterns for Coretta and Rod in the research process. We stress these positionalities not as essentialised or fixed differences but as methodologically significant ones. They are rendered unusual in a research setting by socio-structural factors that make the second researcher (white, male, middle class) a common-place in prison research and the first (black/mixed race, female, working class) almost an exception, particularly with regard to ethnicity.

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The reader will need to decide whether we avoid the damning indictment of self-indulgence and narcissism which are often levelled at such 'confessional accounts' (see for example Lofland and Lofland 1995). However, it is worth noting the intellectual difficulty that we each experienced in thinking reflexively and being self-aware, not least because our training led us to flinch from critically examining and sharing our 'identity stories', which can unflatteringly reveal our anxieties, personal traumas, and shortcomings as human beings and as academic researchers. Nevertheless, we were compelled to recognise that a study of *prisoner identities* could not be divorced from some reflection on our own identities.

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## Reflexively Understanding the Multicultural Prison

### *'Identity Stories' in the Field*

As with any research study, we gathered fieldwork stories which revealed a broad spectrum of emotions based on interactions with prisoners, prison officers, administrators, and the prison itself. The troubling nature of prison ethnographic practice has been vividly described in the accounts of seasoned prison researchers such as Liebling (1999, 2001), King (2000) and Bosworth (1999)<sup>3</sup>, so here the focus is on gendered, racialised and classed experiences, as well as those relating to our biographical histories.

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<sup>1</sup> For Coretta, this is deemed to be largely residual, based on childhood and young adult experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Of White (Jewish) and Nigerian ethnicities.

<sup>3</sup> What Bosworth (1999: 73) calls the 'tyranny of intimacy' in prison ethnography was present in our study too. Prisoners' biographical accounts of violent beatings, neglectful and rejecting behaviour by parents, bereavement, loss, and estrangement, were hard to hear, sad, and

Having served a short custodial sentence in 1982 as a result of incautious political activity, **Rod** brought to the study memories of shared cell life in an unnervingly similar 19<sup>th</sup> century prison (HMP Norwich) during an earlier period of prison overcrowding. Disclosure of this experience was sometimes fraught with a fear that it might be seen as opportunistic, or seen to imply an unwarranted assumption of shared experiences. This reticence was particularly strongly felt at HMYOI Rochester, where incarceration appeared to foster a kind of youthful machismo and a naive stress on masculine authenticity that was difficult to share. However, sharing memories of cells without sanitation, television, or electronic games, or telephones on each wing came easier among the older prisoners at HMP Maidstone. In general, **Rod** found the research experience reanimated prison memories that were positive, negative and ambivalent but affirmed profound misgivings about prison's relationship to patriarchal society (Carlen 1983, Sabo *et al.* 2001). As Bauman (1993: 122) notes, '...penal practice may serve as a laboratory where the tendencies attenuated and adulterated elsewhere can be observed in their pure form'. In this sense, but without implying any equivalence, whether as a prisoner or a researcher, contact with prison can be a deeply unsettling experience.

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For **Coretta**, the look of hostile incomprehension on a white administrator's face when she first saw a black/mixed race woman with 'loxed' hair enter her office, the tendency for some prison officers to primarily address **Rod**, the older, white, male, but junior member of the research team, the implicit refusal of black prisoners at HMP Maidstone to participate in an ethnically mixed group interview, and the more pernicious racist statements made in interviews with **Rod**, were all indicative of gendered and racialised boundaries being erected in everyday life inside the prison<sup>4</sup>. Such marginalising experiences are frequently reported in experiential accounts of empirical research involving minority ethnic and/or female researchers (for a

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deeply troubling. Such intimate sharing of life experiences catapult you into another person's world, creating an emotional, albeit often brief, closeness which can be unnerving in a culture where personal traumas are not typically shared with strangers. Whilst this can be seen as 'ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill', as Stacey (1988: 23), notes, this is 'a mill that has a truly grinding power.' The reason such stories are told so readily in the prison context is precisely because of the deeply isolated and emotionally vulnerable position that prisoners find themselves in. The opportunity to offload, to engage with these feelings (buoyed by some intrusive and piercing questions from the researcher) can hardly stop this venting process. That is why the 'good interview' producing 'good material' (clear answers to the key research questions and 'juicy quotes') can also be the ones that provoke the most pain in the researcher, and uncomfortable feelings of exploitation and disloyalty.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, such racialising processes occur outside the prison too. During the study, **Coretta** was mistaken for a cleaner by an academic researcher attending a residential ESRC conference and assumed to be a publishing assistant rather than an academic member at an editorial board meeting!

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recent account see Maylor 2009). Their epistemological value, however, lies in their ability to remind us that race, class, and gender *always* matter. This is not to suggest that every encounter, frame by frame, is inscribed by inequality and hierarchy, but to underline that postcolonial times in contemporary Britain retain ugly imperial and colonial vestiges (Ali 2009). We should not be surprised when they are part of the research process but nor should we refrain from actively interrogating them.

It was evident that the researchers' respective oscillating Insider and Outsider statuses, and their subaltern/superordinate positionalities proved both productive and constraining. Coretta's interview of a Black British (Dominican) prisoner at HMP Maidstone was relaxed and emotionally intimate, and as the interview proceeded his talk was infused with Caribbean intonations and language (for example, the use of the term 'facety'), presumably because of an assumption of a shared black ethnicity. Conversely, on another occasion Coretta's interview with a mixed race prisoner may have been impeded by gender despite the anticipated benefits of a shared ethnicity. The usual power dynamics of the interview were upturned, as Damian<sup>5</sup> subverted the conduct of the interview by insisting the meeting was more of 'a date'. He resisted attempts to engage with the informed consent process or to respond to introductory questions. His refusal to answer any questions directly by responding 'I don't know, Miss, I don't know, that's a difficult question', or 'I don't care, I don't care', were experienced as a power play. Damian sought to deploy a gendered authority that prioritised sexual flirting, implicitly positioning Coretta primarily as a sexualised gender subject. In exercising his power to withdraw his participation in the research in this manner he also suggested the urgency of sensual denials in the prison environment. The points of meeting around shared ethnicity anticipated by Coretta were cancelled by the stereotypes of a gendered dynamic.

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For Rod his implicitly white perspectives were quickly exposed as he explained the research objectives to a black prisoner in HMP Maidstone, as the following fieldnote extract indicates:

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At one point while I am talking about how we are interested in how people mix in prison, he says '*just look at us. That is how mixed it is in prison. Prisons is full of all kinds of people from all over the world – look at us now. Here I am – a Nigerian, and who am I with? He is Jamaican and he is British and we are mixing together in the prison.*' It is a wonderful moment because although I had heard the one guy's light Jamaican accent, I would, at a glance, have probably lumped them together as Black Londoners. What I might have aggregated, Theo took to be a fine

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper.

example of diversity, of cosmopolitanism. Where I could say 'here were three black guys' he could say 'here are three nationalities'. It gave me pause for thought.

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In *Blacked Out*, an ethnography of an urban high school, Fordham (1996), an African American anthropologist, recalls ambivalent and conflicted memories on entering the field. She noted cultural identification and familiarity as well as cultural strangeness and estrangement in Capital High School, where she experienced a 'braiding' of childhood feelings associated with education and containing her racial and gendered self, with her professional status as an anthropologist. This revealed fears of misrepresentation, exploitation and collusion, rather than the more common ethnographic fears of not establishing a rapport. Such concerns were similarly recorded in Coretta's pre-fieldwork notes. In a post-fieldwork co-interview, Coretta also accessed deeply held negative feelings about experiencing violent racism as a child which contributed to the framing of the research study in Maidstone prison:

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Some of these people [prisoners] look scary to me. Some of them look like the stereotype of a kind of white racist thug. And I found some of them quite frightening... There's a kind of style and a countenance of a kind of older white man... that I find really quite frightening cos it takes me back to when I used to... I'd be shouted at in the street, and I'd be like racially abused, and it would always be by, you know, white men, often who were kind of bulked up, that were tattooed. It was a kind of reminder of that...

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(Co-Interview, 8 May 2009).

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In the following section we use two case studies to elaborate on how aspects of the positionalities and biographical experiences outlined above converged to weave unexpected patterns in the fieldwork, analysis and theorisation.

#### *Case Study 1 - Anthony*

Anthony was a white British prisoner from south east England serving a lengthy sentence for various serious offences. We met him very early in the study at HMP Maidstone, whilst being taken on a tour of one of the wings by a white female prison officer. In our first encounter, Anthony was forthright, slightly aggressive, demanding information about the purposes of our study, seeming only partly convinced by Coretta's desire to underline the inclusive

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nature of the study's research questions concerned with examining *ethnicity* and not just *minority ethnic prisoner* experience. Rod was unusually wary, reluctant to engage with him, picking up a 'bad vibe' from him. Coretta struggled with the 'bogeyman' fear of 'his type'. His 'shaved head, skinhead' appearance coupled with the St George's flag<sup>7</sup> which hung in his cell predisposed her, initially, to see him as embodying the ardent British nationalism, which at its zenith in the 1970s/1980s, manifested in extensive racist and fascist violence. This emotional reaction conflicted directly with professional principles of resisting judgement of research subjects' attitudes and behaviour.

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A couple of months later when Anthony agreed to become the first interviewee at Maidstone, Coretta had mixed feelings about his preference to be interviewed by her. It seemed to confirm earlier concerns, first registered while completing the ESRC outline funding bid that her racialised life experiences might too readily provide the (biased?) lens through which she approached and engaged with social research questions. After all, Anthony had chosen to be interviewed by the minority ethnic member of our research team. More prosaically, however, there was the enormous relief that the all-important first interview had been secured. It was an engaging and extensive interview, rich in material to address our research questions, and Coretta felt more elated than exhausted at the end of the four hours she spent with Anthony discussing his ethnic, masculine, religious and national identity, relationships with family members and friends, drug use and supply in the prison, social hierarchies and prisoner and officer racism.

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At the first level of Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) analysis, taken at face value, Anthony's narrative provided a series of stories about his troubled home life, as well as some reflections on his twenty year mid-level drug supply business. The interview moved into emotionally intimate territory, and Coretta warmed to Anthony as he expressed deep love and responsibility for his son, and later described the difficult relationship he had had with his wife during and after their marriage, and with two other intimates.

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Focusing here specifically on the interview as it addressed prisoner ethnic and social relations, superficially at least, Anthony presented a benign account which persuasively supported Gilroy's (2004) notion of 'convivial multiculturalism' with no immediate hint of the associated melancholia. His talk - 'I know a few Indian birds and all that...there's no problem with me' - was of

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<sup>7</sup> Only later in discussion with a race equality professional did it occur to Coretta that there might be an ulterior motive in the white prison officer taking us into a cell in which the St George's flag was displayed, given its' historical symbolism as an emblem of the openly racist elements of British nationalism.

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getting on well with 'black geezers', hanging out in the cells with a 'bunch of dreads', listening to Gregory Isaacs<sup>8</sup>, and expressing disgust at the bigotry of a prison officer whose 'motto' in relation to black people 'running the wings' was 'to fuck 'em off out of the country' (Interview, 25 July 2007). Anthony displayed much of the sentiment of Rochester prisoners who had, rather superficially, described diversity in the prison social world as unproblematic and unremarkable (Phillips, 2008), representing the prison as a social space in which there was harmonious ethnic co-existence.

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Returning to the interview transcript some time after the interview was conducted allowed an exploration of the words and images Anthony had used, as indicated in Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) second level of analysis. It was evident in the re-reading that Anthony's narrative drew on a repertoire of coded 'race talk' that was rooted in racialised contexts in which black cultural inferiority was frequently inscribed. His reference points - army racism in colonial contexts, his father's black friend and his 'beautiful daughters', prison officers' racism - all displayed the familiar hallmarks of ambivalence, contradiction, and sexualised objectification documented in accounts of racialisation (Nayak 2005, Rattansi 2005). In other instances his talk reflected the incompatibility in his mind of the 'dreads' being Englishmen, and their inability to talk English rather than their often indecipherable patois. He pointedly reveals in the interview his violent reputation on the wing which is upheld when the black prisoners, initially laughing at him, are 'wrapped up' by him. This seems to attest to his need to handle himself physically against *even* the tougher black prisoners, perhaps an attempt to reinsert his superior position in the wing social hierarchy. Anthony also describes his ongoing and unproblematic friendships with 'proper racists' - prisoners who express overtly racist views. Such paradoxical incongruities have been similarly remarked upon by Back (2002: 36), recalling his interview in a Mexican restaurant of British National Party leader Nick Griffin, an affirmed Muhammed Ali admirer.

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At the same time, Anthony makes reference to the loyalty shown to him by black prisoners who vouch for his anti-racism and he convincingly argues for non-Muslim prisoners to respect Muslim prisoners' need to cook halal food uncontaminated by pork products in the self-cook area of the prison. Moreover, Anthony refrained from criticising the dominance of black prisoners on the 'rings' in the self-cook area, explicitly rejecting the plaintive victimisation rhetoric of some white prisoners:

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<sup>8</sup> A renowned reggae/lovers rock artist, popular in the 1970s-1990s.

Like they all moan about the blacks going on the cookers, always taking over... so fucking what, at the end of the day... This is me right, this is me. I don't care who you are, I'm having that ring, you know what I mean, you're not having two rings because that's being greedy, I want that ring... They [black prisoners] respect me more for doing that than standing in the corner waiting, do you understand? (Interview, 25 July 2007).

Anthony also resisted expressing conventional 'race card resentment' when reflecting on the prison administration's reluctance to allow him to display his England colours shortly before the football World Cup in 2006. Tellingly, he recounted being publicly criticised in a meeting which included members of the Board of Visitors, suggesting that he had been the victim of prejudice against his self-professed 'Orangeman'<sup>9</sup> identity. His complaint was of the suppression of his assertion of a distinctive white cultural identity and it contrasted sharply with the views of a significant number of white prisoners for whom the very idea of a white cultural identity was alien and disorienting.

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To borrow from Back (2002: 57), Anthony then, was neither 'anti-racist angel' nor 'rotten-to-the-core' racist devil'. It is this which is revealing of ethnic and social relations in men's prisons at a time when multiculturalism is both practised and problematised in contemporary discourses. It reveals the complexities of racialised identities, both white and black, that stand in contradistinction to the two dimensional 'look-at-the-racists-freak show' favoured by the media and some elements of the anti-racist movement (Hage 2000). That Anthony could move relatively comfortably among the black and Muslim prisoners at Maidstone as well as the white 'proper racists' is also an indication of the uneasy and messy nature of 'living diversity' in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gilroy 2004). It can also be seen as representing the Janus-faced quality of racism referred to by Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001), also signified in Back's (2009: 209) astute observation that the 'fact of multiculturalism is all around us and yet it remains elusive'. Hage (2000:18), for example, emphasises that there is a regressive 'white multiculturalism' which is 'oblivious to its own positionality', but nonetheless viable for white people to operationalise in various reactionary contexts.

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<sup>9</sup> The Orange Order, an Ulster Protestant group established in 1795, is almost exclusively and heavily associated with the British colonial project in Ireland. Though it has 'Lodges' in other former British colonies, such as Canada and West Africa, it is almost entirely composed of white men. In Ireland it is heavily implicated in sustaining the cultural trappings of British loyalist ascendancy and sectarianism (Bell 1978).

At the third level of Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) analysis was the role of unconscious researcher-subject dynamics. These came to be scrutinised in the subsequent discussion between the researchers which sought to interpret Anthony's narrative, and understand more about the contemporary dynamics of ethnicity, nationality and racism in prison. The warmth that Coretta felt towards Anthony also reflected an implicit empathy, borne out of a[n ex-] working class alignment. There was thus an emotional recognition of a shared class heritage but also a different life trajectory ( a kind of 'there but for the grace of God go I'). This was further underlined by Coretta's exposure to a small number of relatives' and friends' imprisonment. Other points of identification connected with Coretta's growing up in the same decades as Anthony, and as a parent concerned with their child's welfare. These class, age and parental affinities represented the possibilities of shared experience, empathy, providing the opportunity of being an informed listener (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), but their limits and tensions must also be acknowledged (Back 1993).

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At the unconscious level of researcher-subject interactions, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001: 97) contend that it is 'being aware of and listening to the different parts of our own psyches, and to the place in us that responded to a given message, that allowed us to tune into the different meanings of our subjects.' This self-conscious engagement can be challenging. Barely registering in Coretta's mind during the interview with Anthony was his tales of participating in armed Loyalist marches in Northern Ireland. By contrast, in transcript, this struck a chord with Rod who, in subsequent case-study reflections, denoted himself as the 'mirror image' of Anthony, having himself been involved in Irish republican marches there in the 1970s and 1980s. For Rod, Anthony's account revealed ardent commitment to violent fascistic, racist, and nationalistic tendencies which were probably only partly a product of his mid-level involvement in the shadowy economy of the illicit drug markets occupied by Irish paramilitaries. Whilst interviewing Anthony might have proved uncomfortable for Rod, as they ironically shared much that could not be shared easily, Rod's Anglo-Irish heritage subsequently provided a window into Anthony's national/religious identity which was emotionally closed and experientially remote to Coretta.

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In this interview extract, Coretta's follow-up questions picked up an earlier theme of Muslim prisoners rather than more directly interrogating Anthony's identification with northern Irish political and religious sensibilities, leaving his white ethnicity and identification with Ulster Loyalism relatively unexplored:

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**Anthony:** All right I've been on marches over there, loads of marches, alright... you know, we've got a UVF<sup>10</sup> and all that alright, yeah. But we don't class ourselves as terrorists or anything like that, do you understand, we just class ourselves as putting the fact right, you know what I mean. Yeah, it's a British... we're British, you know, put it right. I don't agree with people blowing people up, you know, I've put guns to people's heads and all that but it's only in threats, you know what I mean...

**Coretta:** So when you mentioned they um, you know, the sort of terrorism um with um Muslims [mentioned earlier in the interview by Anthony], is there like anything... has that caused any tensions in prison...?

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Furthermore, despite significant evidence to the contrary, based on the preliminary analysis of our data at Rochester (Phillips 2008), and being well-versed in the sociological literature regarding the ambivalent and contradictory nature of racialisation and racism, Coretta found herself initially resistant to 'hearing' Anthony's racialised talk even in subsequent readings of the transcript, seemingly in this case, ignoring Duneier's (2004: 101) warning that 'neither blacks nor whites...talk honestly about race in the other's presence'. (Duneier 2004: 101; cf. Back 2002). This selective filtering, or denial in psychoanalytic terms, can perhaps be seen as a psychic defence against anxiety, as Coretta sought to avoid revisiting the hurt and anger which was experienced as a child victim of violent racism (Bowling 1999). As Hunt (1989: 27) suggests, 'certain behaviours engaged in during fieldwork may involve a repetition in action of repressed memories and unconscious fantasies'. It was seemingly psychically easier for Coretta to position Anthony as adopting the 'harmony discourse' (Back 1996), of representing positive inter-ethnic relations, unmarred by racialising tendencies, reflecting childhood fantasies which were far removed from the presence of the extreme racism of the 1970s and 1980s. It reflected a need to repress the threatening possibility of Anthony representing the embodiment of the white racist working class bogey-man, and project on to him an emblem of living diversity, allowing her to thus relinquish anxious feelings about doing research in a Kentish prison<sup>11</sup>. In this sense, the case study exemplifies the significance of psycho-social understandings which recognise psychological defensiveness within specific

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<sup>10</sup> Ulster Volunteer Force, an illegal loyalist paramilitary group that actively fostered links with British fascist organisations from the 1980s onwards, and was heavily implicated in illicit drug markets .

<sup>11</sup> Such anxieties may have been heightened by Coretta's domestic plans to move out of multicultural London into the suburbs.

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social and cultural contexts, an approach gaining some recognition in contemporary in criminology (see for example Gadd and Jefferson 2007b).

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### Case Study 2 – Warren

Warren, one of the older white prisoners at Maidstone, was on nodding terms with **Rod** and, having been randomly selected, agreed to be interviewed in his cell. **Rod** reports in his field journal feeling frustrated and discomfited by the interview. Warren revealed a complex life-history involving extensive travel from homes in Essex, London, and Zimbabwe, where he lived for 18 years. In the early stages of the interview he explained his South African accent as deriving from the speaking of ‘Dutch’ which he declined to refer to as Afrikaans because, as he put it in interview, ‘Afrikaans is a bastardised version of Dutch in my opinion’.

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Seeking insights into his domestic and personal life proved difficult as Warren reported relatively unconventional family arrangements involving a sequence of intimate relations, and in one case marriage, to three sisters. The existence of three children from the marriage featured less prominently than an amusing series of anecdotes about their mother’s predilection for keeping up to 28 cats in the family home.

At face value, the first tier of Walkerdine’s psycho-social schematic, the interview presented a complex and tangled narrative reflecting the difficulty of conveying the experiences of a full and longer life under the limitations of a formatted interview.

**Rod**’s subsequent reflections on the interview, corresponding to Walkerdine *et al.*’s (2001) second level (*Unconscious Subject*) analysis, indicate a concern about Warren’s repeated evasions and discrete codifications of ‘race’ in the interview. The sense of ambiguity and difficulty in the interview condensed around a brief exchange where it seemed the tables were turned on **Rod** and his national identity (Irish) became the object of Warren’s interrogation. The reversal of roles occurred as the interview schedule broached the subject of ethnicity, as reproduced here with some additional annotations and elisions:

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**Rod.:** Um, the idea of sort of ethnic identity, this idea that, you know, there is peoples with all sorts of backgrounds, heritages, experiences, and you know, sharing sort of space in...[*here I was going to say ‘prison’*]

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**Warren:** On our small island [laughs].

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**Rod:** But what about, I mean which ethnic group do you tend to say you belong to when you...?

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**Warren:** I’m a white Englishman.

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**Rod:** I mean one of the ways sometimes of feeling more, I mean, I don't feel particularly sort of British in Britain kind of thing, but if I'm on holiday with my kids I feel much more conscious of being British. I don't know if that's... it's only when you were in um say Zimbabwe you felt, sort of, that was a different thing? Again you know, you might have felt more white there, I don't know?

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**Warren:** A lot of the Zimbabweans were actually ex patriots [unclear - talking together]. But um if I may ask you a question from your last statement, why do you not feel as British as you might feel in your own country? What would be the reason for that? Because of the influx of many other peoples?

**Rod:** Um, no I mean because I've got an Irish passport so...

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**Warren:** Are you from Ireland yourself?

**Rod:** Well my father is from Ireland you see, so yeah, that sense, you know, although probably anybody here...

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**Warren:** When you say Ireland I presume you're talking about Eire, southern Ireland?

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**Rod:** Yeah, yeah. So that would be that sense although people would hear my voice and they'd say he's English, he's... you know, I don't have a trace of an Irish accent.

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**Warren:** I don't care what clan you belong to, you're a foreigner [laughs].

**Rod:** Yeah, well that's partly the thing you know, so I've lived in Britain all my life, you know...

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**Warren:** Sure. I hope we've made you welcome [laughs].

**Rod** found this section of the interview unsettling in the way that it seemed to confirm the suspicions he had of Warren's dissembling with respect to 'race'.

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Key words and phrases of the white Anglo-ethnic majority lexicon such as 'small island', 'foreign' and welcoming 'guests' appeared to imprint **Rod** with the characteristics that Warren needed to 'other' him, and convey an implicit authority over him in this process. The subversion of the interview convention was also playful, but the humour was experienced as having an unpleasant edge. At one level it signalled Warren's refusal to 'play by the rules' or engage with the subject matter of the research, as can happen in any interview, and at another there was the deployment of an apparently 'trump card', white Englishness, which leant weight and exclusionary menace to the subversion. Every interview involves a performance from both sides but in this interview the performance became more self-conscious, more of an ethnic masquerade in which **Rod**'s suspicions of Warren's ethnicity were met with

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Warren's of Rod's. As Rod notes in subsequent reflections 'no meeting ground found, a chasm opened'.

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The third level of analysis suggested by Walkerdine *et al.* (2001), *Researcher-Subject Unconscious Dynamics*, indicate that Researcher 2's interactions with Warren may have been complicated by the baggage, in his mind, accompanying his respondent's accent, namely those associated with the white supremacist regimes of pre-independence Zimbabwe and apartheid-era South Africa. In addition, Warren's firm avowal of a straightforward English national identity and his disavowal of antagonism toward minority ethnic groups were experienced as a psychic challenge to Rod's assumptions, particularly when his ambivalence toward his own national identity was exposed. Warren's insistence on strong, rooted, identification with place, his East London working class heritage, also potentially antagonised Rod's sense of personal displacement, of being neither English nor Irish, and white middle class rootlessness.

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These dynamics appear quite specific to the white ethnicities represented in the interview, those of a white, working class Englishman and a white, middle class Anglo-Irishman. Although in the empirical sense they appear to shut down the mutual exploration of ethnicity, they open up in the theoretical sense the importance of interrogating white and colonial sensibilities around the question of English nationality, and Anglo-ethnic indeterminacy, why it tends to elicit tension, evasiveness, defensiveness, anger and incomprehension (Mac an Ghail 1999). Understanding white identities as having distinctive characteristics of their own that will flow through the research process, rather than operating as a passive backdrop to other racialised identities more commonly scrutinised in criminological research involves unpicking the 'empty' monolithic status of a singular 'invisible' 'whiteness'. White men are not inoculated at birth from the political and economic forces that seem to shape other racialised and gendered identities and establishing their contours in research removes the privilege of absence they currently enjoy. As Gallagher (2000 : 84) remarks '[D]ata does not 'speak for itself', nor does it emerge in a vacuum. Who we are (and who we appear to be in a specific context) influences the questions we ask, the responses we get and the scholarship we produce'. To repeat Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) suggestion 'being aware of and listening to the different parts of our own psyches, and to the place in us that responds to a given message... allow[s] us to tune in to the different meanings of our subjects'.

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## Our Lives/Prisoners' Lives: Co-Constructed Knowledge Production

Ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other. (Stacey 1988: 24)

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It is sobering to read Bennett's (1981) account of 'the rhetoric of criminology', not least because he made very similar suggestions after reviewing the 'ethnographic greats' of Chicago-era criminology, such as Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller*, to those we are now making. Notwithstanding the recent special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* (Volume 11 Issue 4) on this topic it is not hard to recognise a contemporary resonance in Bennett's (1981: 248) observation that:

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Although these criminologists see themselves as scientists working in a micro-analytical tradition, they apparently assume that developing a personal relationship with a delinquent and transmitting urgent messages to an audience are more important than analyzing the many small causes that influence the acquisition and publication of those messages – more important than giving an autobiographical account of themselves...

This paper has attempted to take on this challenge, recognising that interrogating what Gelsthorpe (2007: 518) refers to as the biographical 'underside' of the ethnographic research process can enhance our understanding of sociological stories (see also Reiner 1998). Our contention is that we must be wary of a tendency toward sociologically 'airbrushed' accounts, cosmetically enhanced for objectivity in which the awkwardness of the construction is consigned to a methodological afterword. This practice brackets away the subjectivity inherent in human interaction, disguising and diminishing its role in the production of criminological knowledge. As Liebling (1999: 160) states, in the prison, '[w]e see, observe, but inwardly (subjectively) digest scenes and encounters; our inner lives interplaying with the lives of others', and yet the final accounts of prison ethnographies rarely dwell on that interplay. Methodologically, we need to be alert to the ways in which we may distort, misrepresent, or have subjects' experiences obscured from view because of *our* biographical experiences or subjectivities. One of the key benefits then, of a reflexive interrogation of positionality and subjectivity, is to make more transparent the interpretive process.

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Undoubtedly, the configuration of our 'mixed' research team, with its classically categorical subaltern and superordinate identities and biographical histories, enabled us to actively probe these processes more directly than might be ordinarily possible in much criminological research, including that

undertaken in prisons. Our embodiment as gendered, classed and racialised researchers, meant that it was all but impossible to follow the tendency of a 'regression to the (white, male, middle class) mean' that effaces such hierarchies. The circumstances this embodiment generated, that we have outlined briefly in this article, propelled us toward reflexivity. It operated against fully relinquishing Insider and Outsider positions, but our identity polarities presented us with opportunities to triangulate interpretations, rather than relying, unreflexively, on a singular positional perspective. As Bourdieu (1999: 615) warns, the 'simple virtue of reflexivity' cannot completely 'control the multiple and complex effects of the interview relationship' but it both contributes to, and exposes, a mutual resistance to the implicit objectification that occurs in ethnography. This has the potential to lead to appreciative and rounded insights more faithful both to the complexities of prison life and the research process (Liebling 1999).

**Deleted:** As such, our criticism of earlier prison ethnographic work, such as Crewe (2009) may be misplaced.

Furthermore, in reframing Liebling's (2001) call to study subordinates (prisoners) and superordinates (officers/Governors) in prison research, we argue for greater inclusion of the positional subjectivities of the researchers, as well as those of the subaltern and marginalised prisoners. Situating ourselves more explicitly within the co-construction of prison worlds can provide an opportunity to disrupt the dehumanising othering that is prison's principal social accomplishment. Doing so might produce accounts which amount to more than 'a report from behind bars' of 'unfortunate others'. Situating researcher's biographies and experiences more centrally in the analysis can perhaps help expose and breach a dynamic that however unintentionally reproduces the 'othering' functions of prison. In popular culture the spectacular 'othering' of prison and prisoners substitutes for, and obscures, its banality and its grinding dullness, distancing people from responsibility for its more mundane realities. This is not to suggest a simplistic political solidarity with men and women 'behind bars' is either possible or necessary for criminological researchers, but registers the profound ethical ambiguities of conducting such research.

There is an urgency to tell the tale of the burgeoning prison population and its attendant dehumanisation, but incorporating research subjectivity need not detract from this task, and can enhance it. Psycho-social attention to the particular, the personal and the hidden fosters an 'interpretive approach that is sensitive to the inconsistencies in the way people behave toward others and talk about themselves' (Gadd and Jefferson 2007:184). In this we echo the plea in Walkerdine *et al.* (2001:88) for a 'third space' in which 'the social, cultural and psychic are researched together' rather than held apart. This is all the more necessary given the comparative dearth of such approaches in prison ethnographies and criminological research more generally. It is rendered

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more urgent by the growth of what Bourdieu (1999:618) initially characterised as 'tape-recorder sociology', and what [Back \(2007\)](#), more recently, sees as 'fast-food', sound-bite sociology. The aim of this article has been to draw attention to the methodological and epistemological contours of prison research, its complexities and the opportunities for *verstehen*. Using two case studies and a psycho-social approach we have examined the ways in which our subjectivities inform, frame, and mediate relationships within the field, but also are manifest at the interpretative and writing stages of prison ethnographic work. Such an approach risks self-indulgence, but even for the sceptics, working in this manner can provide criminologists with a 'deeper understanding both of the conditions of existence of which they are a product and of the social effects that can be exercised by the research relationship' (Bourdieu 1999: 621).

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