

UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN SOCIAL WORLD: INSIDER RESEARCH IN PRISON

by

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ABSTRACT

The prison setting provides researchers with specific challenges that must be considered prior to conducting a study. This paper addresses some of these challenges and provides an argument for why the use of a qualitative methodological approach may be the best strategy for what Marquardt (1986) refers to as "penetrating the backstage prison behavior settings." Specifically, this paper provides a brief discussion of the different types of research methods that have been used to study the prison. Secondly, we will address the strengths and weaknesses of a qualitative methodological approach to studying the prison. Third, we will provide as an exemplar an unique approach to the study of prisons, namely an ethnographic study that utilized a complete participant (inmate-sociologist) and an outside observer (sociology professor) as a way of achieving an insider's understanding while maintaining an outsider's objectivity. The paper concludes with a discussion of alternative ways of achieving insider knowledge of the prison social world.

Social scientists quite often disagree as to what the best methods are to study social phenomena. Some feel that the only way to develop an understanding of the social world is to become a participant in that world and learn by doing; others feel we can learn more by creating or simulating the social world in a laboratory setting; still others rely on survey research methods to gain an understanding of that social world. Each method has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Researchers should pay particular attention to the type of information they are seeking and the setting where the research will take place before deciding on the appropriate method or methods to be utilized.

Some settings provide problems for researchers because of specific characteristics of the setting. Prisons are one setting that do set certain limitations

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on the methods that might be employed in the study. Silberman (1995:4) identifies a number of problems in conducting research in corrections. First, prison inmates may be concerned about issues of confidentiality regarding their own prison misconduct. Secondly, some inmates are concerned that research findings might be used to justify more restrictive policies. A third problem is related to the separateness of the prison world, where cultural values and norms may be different from the world of the researcher. Zwerman and Gardner (1986) raise a different set of obstacles to prison research by noting that the research process may be impeded by the state's intrusion into the research project. Two specific issues they address include the state's attempt to define the nature of the study and the state's demands for access to the data.

In this paper we will first look at some of the ways in which social scientists have studied prisons. Secondly, we will examine the strengths and weaknesses of a qualitative methodological approach to the study of prisons. Following this, we will present a study of a maximum security prison that was conducted by the author. Traditional participant observation data collection and analysis techniques were used in this study. Along with the ten months of participant observation at a maximum security prison for men in the Midwest, other sources of data include focused interviews with prison inmates and the analysis of prison journals. One problem faced by researchers using the methodology of participant observation is achieving an insider's understanding while maintaining an outsider's objectivity. The methodology used in the prison study being presented incorporated a distinctive approach to dealing with this problem, in that the fieldwork data resulted from a collaboration between a sociologist (as an outside observer) and a prison inmate-sociology graduate student (as an inside participant).

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PRISONS

In attempting to achieve a more complete understanding of the prison world and how it affects people who are sentenced to prison, social scientists have applied a wide variety of methodological strategies. One method used is the "controlled experiment," in which subjects are assigned to "inmate" and "guard" roles in a mock prison setting, and attitudinal and behavioral changes are recorded throughout the experiment (See Haney et al., 1973). Although experiments do demonstrate that behavioral changes occur for subjects playing the roles of inmate and guard, these prison simulations are unsatisfactory for understanding the effects of a prison sentence because of their artificiality. The problem of artificiality arises for a number of reasons: the experimental subjects are aware that they are participating in a scientific experiment; they know that their involvement in the "prison" is only for a brief period of time; and they are certain that the researchers would never place them in any physical danger. For these reasons, experiments can provide only the weakest of prison simulations.

To avoid artificiality, our understanding of the prison world must be based on

the experiences of actual participants in that world. One way of assessing these experiences would be through survey research methods, which allows the collection of a large amount of information from large numbers of inmates or staff (See Garabedian, 1963; Wheeler, 1961). Quantitative research often focuses on issues of administrative concern, such as over-crowding, gang violence, recidivism, etc. (Fleisher, 1989). Although survey methods can produce valuable information they also have serious limitations. The preconceptualized and prestructured nature of questionnaires and structured interviews is not conducive to an understanding of everyday life within prisons. Survey findings may enumerate the effects of a prison sentence but they do not provide us with how these effects occur.

Without experiencing prison ourselves, the most direct way to increase our understanding would be to interact with participants—to observe and talk with them repeatedly, over an extended period of time and within the “natural” setting of the prison itself. This has been the most fruitful approach for the development of sociological knowledge about prisons (See Davidson, 1974; Jacobs, 1977; and Clemmer, 1940). Gresham Sykes (1958:136), while stating that participant observation is apt to prove defective as a technique for securing data (because of the difficulty of remaining neutral), noted that “it (participant observation) leads to a far more detailed view of either the captives or captors than is possible by other means.” Participant observation methods have their own limitations, particularly the necessity of viewing a social world through the perspectives of only some of the participants, but they remain the most appropriate means for increasing our understanding of a hidden social world, such as a prison.

John Irwin (1987) makes a strong case for the use of qualitative methods in the study of prisons. Borrowing from David Matza (Matza, 1969), he notes that the qualitative approach is essential in achieving a full understanding of human behavior. Irwin (1987:42) goes on to state “that any approach not based firmly on qualitative or phenomenological ground is not only a distortion of the phenomenon, but also is very likely a corruption.” According to Irwin, distortion occurs because the meanings and categories we employ are inaccurate. As an example, he refers to quantitative analyses by researchers of the two models (deprivation and importation) that influence inmate social relations during the 1970’s. What troubled him about this research was that his own qualitative research indicated that drastic changes (racial conflict, gangs, etc.) had taken place in prisons and that these models were irrelevant by the late 1960’s. Irwin’s stronger point is that these distortions are not random, and are often used to maintain the status quo. That is the corruption that he speaks of.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN PRISONS

According to DiIulio (1991), prisons are the most understudied component of the criminal justice system. But, the bulk of what we do know about life behind bars is attributable to researchers who have relied on some version of participant

observation techniques (Jacobs, 1974). These researchers have entered the field in the role of staff members, as inmates, and some have entered without formal or informal status within the prison.

Through participant observation a researcher attempts to understand a group or culture by directly observing and interacting with members of that group or culture. Guided by theoretical interests this researcher engages in tasks ranging from participation in the routine activities of the people being studied to systematic observation of their behavior; his communication with them ranges from casual conversations to formal interviews. To the extent that it is possible the participant observer wants to be accepted as a member of the group so that the analysis will include both the actual experiences of membership and members’ interpretations of their experiences. Yet the understanding of social behavior often requires looking beyond members’ explanations, so the researcher must avoid becoming so immersed in group life that he loses sight of alternative explanations.

Participant observation is thus a methodological perspective that requires the researcher to reconcile the need for intimate knowledge with the need for objectivity. In his discussion of these “contrary ontological-epistemological tendencies,” Fred Davis presents the metaphors of the “Martian” and “Convert.” Granting the necessity of an “outside” perspective on the social world under study, Davis (1973:336) argues that:

The Martian...yearns to grasp the human situation with wholly fresh or, better yet, stranger’s eyes, in a blush of wonderment as it were. In order to do this he wants to divest himself completely of the vast array of unwritten cultural assumptions, rules of thumb, modes of sensibility and—were it somehow possible—the very language, which comprise the “cognitive stuff” of our everyday worlds and beings.

Acknowledging the importance of also acquiring first-hand, subjective knowledge about the social world being studied, Davis (1973:337) notes that:

The Convert, too, starts from the conviction that the human’s social world is a wholly constructed one and not something given in nature or through outside agency. Paradoxically, however, he draws a very different conclusion from this axiom than does the Martian. Because in the first instance he knows himself to be an outsider and not a natural member of the group he wishes to study, he takes it as an article of faith that the lives, views and aspirations of natural members (including, perhaps, the very ways they perceive, organize, and interpret their constructed worlds must differ in

significant, if not in all, respects from his own. The main methodological objective of his inquiry, therefore, is to reduce as far as possible the estrangement he feels from his subjects so that he may begin to perceive, experience and interpret their world as they do.

Because neither of these perspectives is entirely satisfactory, Davis (1973:342) concludes that the participant observer must strive for some balance between them:

For, in the end, the capacity to experience the world freshly from the outside and knowingly from the inside is part of the great duality of intelligent social life itself. To replicate in our sociological research this duality through an ongoing interior dialogue which constantly counterposes the stark epiphanies of the one to the intimate knowingness of the other moves us nearer, I would suggest, to a more felicitous account of humans' actual lived world than can either stance by itself.

These opposing perspectives cannot be combined in any standardized form, to be applied universally to all studies. Rather, this balance must be determined for each specific study, based on the information required by the study and the participant observer role that can be negotiated by the researcher.

The methodology of participant observation encompasses a number of specific strategies for attaining a suitable balance between objectivity and intimacy. Raymond Gold (1958:217-233) has described four of these strategies in his typology of participant observer roles: the "complete participant" role, through which the researcher actively participates in the group being studied by does not reveal the intentions of the research; the "participant as observer" role, through which the researcher actively participates in the group as a scientific observer; the "observer as participant" role, through which the researcher engages in only minimal interaction with group members, in an official role as an observer; and the "complete observer" role, through which the researcher records observations in a manner that does not require direct participation in the group being studied. Each of these strategies has methodological advantages and limitations, and the appropriateness of each must be determined by the requirements of the study. The complete participant role, for example, offers the greatest access to "intimate knowledge" about the group and the greatest opportunity for introspection. At the same time the "role pretense" inherent in this strategy can lead to personal difficulties for the researcher and to methodological problems ranging from the difficulty of secret notetaking to the danger of "going native"—of losing a detached objectivity and seeing the group wholly from the perspective of its members. At the other extreme, the complete observer is in no danger of going native but does not have access to the intimate knowledge afforded by direct participation in group

activities.

The participant as observer role offers perhaps the best general strategy for combining the intimate knowledge of the complete participant with the objectivity of the complete observer. This strategy is commonly used for participant observation studies in various settings, including prisons. How well the strategy works in a prison study depends on the specific role assumed by the researcher and the extent to which this role can be integrated into the formal and/or informal organization of the prison. To be identified to staff and inmates as a sociologist, college professor or student does not ensure intimate or unbiased information. Jacobs (1977:215-229) described the suspicions and hostilities he encountered during his study of the Stateville prison, and the effects of these difficulties on the information he received. Because academic roles may not be fully understood by prison inmates, and because anyone whose role is not clearly defined is automatically suspect, researchers often have to develop alternative roles. Jacobs, for example, came to be viewed in the more acceptable role of prison advocate, although this role also affected both the nature and the amount of information he received. Other researchers have conducted their observations while performing staff roles, a strategy that provides direct access to both inmates and staff but nonetheless inhibits the collections of intimate information (See Clemmer, 1940).

The specific role assumed by the researcher—sociologist, student, staff member and so on—thus affects his access to various kinds of information. Within any of these roles, the nature of the relationships he establishes with inmates also influences what he hears and sees, and what he is prevented from hearing and seeing. No matter how skilled he is at establishing these relationships, however, the participant as observer is necessarily restricted to a partial view of the prison world. Because of practical considerations, as well as the confines of negotiated roles and relationships, most researchers find it impossible to speak with all the inmates in a prison, unless these contacts are restricted to structured interviews on a narrow range of topics.

Another limitation of the participant as observer strategy is that the researcher cannot become a full-time member of the prison world, even if he has full-time staff responsibilities. Although he may devote many hours each day to his research, visit the prison at different times of the day and extend his research over many months, the participant as observer can never really know "what it means to be in prison" because he cannot experience the totality of the prison world. Like a prison employee, he is free to leave the prison at any time and, when he is at the prison, he has greater control over his own actions than do prison inmates. This partial involvement can be an advantage, in that it can help the researcher maintain an outsider's objectivity. It is not, however, a guarantee of objectivity; researchers using a participant as observer strategy must still grapple with the danger of "going native." The more that a researcher is able to establish personal relationships with inmates, and hence the more likely to acquire intimate knowledge about the prison world, the greater this danger becomes. Within any participant observation

strategy, balancing objectivity and intimacy must be regarded as a continuous struggle rather than as a methodological problem that can be solved through research design alone.

Other factors besides the researcher's participant observer role and fieldwork skills can affect a study's success. Among the most remarkable accounts of the prison world are those provided by John Irwin (1970), who had served a prison sentence before pursuing a graduate degree and subsequently returning to the prison world as a participant observer. Irwin's prior experience as an inmate unquestionably contributed to his insider's perspective on the prison, while his sociological training and the passage of time presumably fortified his outsider's objectivity.

DERIVATION OF THE STUDY

Ordinarily, one of the most difficult steps in sociological research on prisons is gaining unrestricted access to inmates' day-to-day lives within the prison world. Our study originated with such access, when the author (Jones) was sentenced to a year and a day in a maximum security prison for men in the upper midwest region of the United States. Through negotiations with prison officials, Jones was permitted to enroll in a graduate sociology course in field methods, taught by a former professor (Schmid) [1] of the author. What began as a directed studies course between professor and former student rapidly evolved into a more comprehensive project conducted by co-researchers. At the same time, it evolved from a general observational study of prison life to an analysis of the prison experience of first-time, short-term inmates.

Our fieldwork essentially began with a journal that Jones started keeping several days before the beginning of his sentence. His early entries were predominantly personal expressions, although they included more traditional ethnographic descriptions as well. Once our research project was formally initiated, Jones restricted his journal entries to personal thoughts and impressions and a chronology of his daily experiences. Using a process similar to the "diary-interview" method described by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), these entries provided a framework for extended conversations between the researchers. Professor Schmid's notes on these conversations were then used to derive new observational strategies and to identify potential analytic themes.

In addition to journal entries, Jones also prepared field notes on his participation in prison activities, his conversations with individual prisoners and groups of inmates, and his general observations of prison life. This procedure meant that the journal and the field notes contained different kinds of information, and it had the additional advantage of keeping the fieldnotes more objective than they otherwise might have been. Although these general observations incorporated the experiences of hundreds of prisoners, most of the fieldnotes were based on his repeated, often daily, contacts with about fifty inmates as well as on personal

relationships established with a smaller number of inmates.

We were able to discuss our research progress through letters, occasional telephone calls, and regular meetings arranged with the cooperation of prison officials. Shortly after the beginning of the study, we settled on a communication routine that proved to be quite efficient. Jones prepared one to three field observations each week (averaging 8-10 handwritten pages) and mailed them to Professor Schmid for annotation and suggestions. Every other week Professor Schmid would meet with Jones in an office or testing room provided by the prison's education department. At these meetings, we would review the journal entries and observations, plan our research strategy, and piece together our emerging conceptualization of the prison world.

Following Jones' release from prison, we devoted a year to the analysis of our initial data, and then returned to the prison to conduct focused interviews. Using information provided by prison officials, we were able to identify and interview twenty additional first-time, short-term inmates. The fieldwork we had already completed guided our preparation of the interview questions, which addressed inmates' changing prison imagery and adaptation tactics as they progressed through their prison careers. We decided that Jones should do the actual interviewing, on the assumption that inmates would be more willing to talk freely with someone who had recently completed his own prison sentence.

Our analysis (Jones and Schmid, 1989; Schmid and Jones, 1990; 1991; 1993) of the prison experiences of first-time, short-term inmates thus draws on three primary sources of data. Our principal source is the field notes, representing ten months of participant observation by a "complete participant" in collaboration with a "complete observer." Included in these notes are specific events and interactions, quotations from Jones' fellow inmates, and general observations of the prison world. A second source are Jones' prison journals in which he recorded his own prison experiences. We used these journals throughout our project as a form of research development, and we draw on them to illustrate portions of our analytic model. Our subsequent interviews with other inmates constitute our third source of data: these interviews allowed us to pursue a number of topics in greater depth and provided us with an independent source of data to evaluate our initial findings.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE VIEWS OF PRISON

Jones' prison sentence, our decision to conduct the study together and our focus on first-time, short-term inmates offered us a different strategy for balancing objectivity and intimacy. For ten months we were able to observe the prison world from the viewpoints of both a complete participant and a complete observer, combining the advantages of both while minimizing the limitations of each. Jones' full-time involvement in the prison world gave us direct access to insiders' knowledge as well as the benefits of introspection.

In his interactions with other inmates, and with staff, Jones was not seen as a

sociologist or a student or a prison reform advocate or any other kind of outsider. He was seen as a prisoner. Moreover, the author wasn't merely assuming the role of a prisoner to learn about the prison world—he was a prisoner. He literally shared the experiences of other first-time, short-term inmates—observing himself in prison as he observed others. When he began his sentence Jones had no more knowledge about prison than any other first-time inmate and he was no better prepared to face the ordeal of his sentence. He did possess basic participant observation skills, however, which enhanced the research benefits of his role as a complete participant in the prison world.

There are certain limitations associated with Jones' role, as there are with any participant observer role, but they did not present insurmountable problems. As a new inmate, Jones did not have immediate access to the entire prison world; because of our focus on first-time, short-term inmates, however, Jones was in a position to discover this world through the same means as other new inmates, and to document the discovery process. Jones was also constrained by the interaction norms that exist in prison, especially those norms governing interaction between members of different racial or ethnic groups. These norms are not absolute but they are sufficiently strong to suggest that Jones' initial observations primarily depicted the experiences of white inmates. We were able to compensate for this racial selectivity to some extent through interviews we conducted in a second phase of our fieldwork. Writing fieldnotes, which is often a problem for a complete participant, did not prove to be particularly difficult because prison cells offer some degree of privacy and because Jones was known to be taking college courses, so his writing activities did not seem unusual.

The principal limitation of a complete participant role is the high risk that the researcher will lose his objectivity by "going native." Jones did find this to be a problem, beginning with his earliest fieldnotes. Because he was a new inmate and because he was reacting directly to everything that was happening to him, he found it increasingly difficult to view the prison objectively and to know how objective his observations were. He also found it difficult, at times, to identify the sociological significance of his observations—the world of a maximum security prison is far removed from that of a college campus. It was at this point that we agreed to conduct the research together, so that we could combine an insider's information with an outsider's objectivity. This combination of viewpoints represents the unique quality of our methodology.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research role we have described came as a result of circumstances that were both unusual and fortuitous but not unprecedented. There is an established tradition of sociological research that incorporates the researcher's own experiences and social world memberships (e.g. Kortaba, 1983; Zola, 1982), including collaborative studies (e.g. Taylor and Tewksbury, 1995; Cordozo-Freeman, 1984). The question

is how this method affects the research process and, ultimately, what kind of social science it yields.

There are clearly limitations to insider research. In a general sense, "the most critical question about any 'auto-ethnography' (Hayano, 1979; 1982) is whether researchers will be able to examine their own social world objectively." But there are also advantages that outweigh the possible limitations. Authentic participation in the prison world enables a depth of feeling and introspection not ordinarily possible (Ellis, 1991; Adler and Adler, 1987). As Krieger (1985:320) argues, "the great danger of doing injustice to the reality of the other does not come about through the use of the self, but through lack of use of a full sense of self which, concomitantly, produces a stifled, artificial, limited, and unreal knowledge of others." This is precisely the concerns raised by Irwin (1987) in his criticism of positivistic methods leading to distortion and corruption.

Marquardt's (1986) study of prison guards provides an excellent example of both the strengths and weaknesses of insider research. In the role of a prison guard, Marquardt was able to collect data on behaviors often concealed from other fieldworkers. According to Marquardt (1986:30), "involvement enabled me to experience face-to-face the totality of prison life. In addition, the insider role promotes a firsthand view of the institution and whether or not policies are being complied with or circumvented." Some of the problems associated with insider research described by Marquardt center on ethical concerns, reactivity, and the conflict between the roles of researcher and guard. Similar issues were raised by Fleisher (1989) in his insider study of the U.S. Penitentiary at Lompoc, California.

There are other specific limitations and advantages in the present study. First, the research role of Jones does distinguish him from other first-time, short-term inmates, but the fieldnotes and journal allow for more accurate recall than subsequent recreation by the author or others. The research role also establishes and continuously reinforces the kind of sociological distance that Berger and Kellner (1981) see as essential to the sociological perspective: "The scientific relevance structure first of all means that I can tell myself 'I am doing sociology.'" According to Jackson (1990:29), "quite a number of fieldworkers carry around with them images of additional others who are involved in their fieldnote making." This would be true in a metaphorical sense from the research role itself; it becomes true in a more literal sense in collaborative research. We are confident that we have identified the fundamental elements of the prison experience of first-time, short-term prisoners, as evidenced by the reactions of former prison inmates to our study.

If the goal of doing research is knowledge and understanding, we must be creative in our approach to the study of social phenomena. Although the methodology described in this paper is somewhat unique, there are other ways in which we can gain insider knowledge through a collaborative process.

The way this has traditionally been carried out is by identifying and relying on a key informant. Whyte's (1943) classic study of an urban neighborhood relied heavily on an insider from the community. More directly related to prison research

is Cardoza-Freeman's (1984) study of Washington State Penitentiary. In this study, Eugene Delorme, a native American prisoner, did most of the interviews for this study. An excellent example of the insider-outsider collaborative process is described by Taylor and Tewksbury (1995).

With prison overcrowding a significant issue in today's prisons, we can expect prison administrators to be even more careful about allowing outsiders in to study their institutions. As a result, for researchers interested in gaining an insider's perspective on the social world of prisoners, we are going to have to be ever more creative in gaining this insider's knowledge. I can think of two ways in which this can be accomplished. First, we can utilize insiders' (both inmates and guards) expressions of their experiences. For example, many prisons have a newspaper that publishes the poetry of the inmates. This poetry, and other writings by inmates, have then been analyzed through a content analysis by researchers (Sheffler, 1984; 1986; Jones and Schmid, 1991). In these writings, we find descriptions of prison conditions, inmate coping strategies, as well as other issues related to doing time.

A second, and potentially more productive approach to gaining insider's knowledge is through teaching in prison. Many of us have had opportunities to teach college courses in prison. On a small scale, the students in the class could be asked to write on topics related to that particular course. For example, if the course was a Deviance or Criminology course, the students could be asked to write their deviant life history, discussing such issues as turning points in their lives, beliefs and values, socialization issues, etc. On a larger scale, a class project could include interviews and observation (See Thomas, et al., 1980; 1981). As Lockwood (1991) noted, prisoners, once trained, can carry out research in prisons. Inmates are currently an untapped resource in conducting research on prisons.

As has been articulated by a variety of researchers (Peak, 1985; Unnithan, 1986; Farkas, 1992), there are numerous hindrances in conducting research in corrections. That partially explains the paucity of research on prisons and other elements of the criminal justice system. In response to this, researchers must be more creative in their attempts to gain insider knowledge about the prison.

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From the Inside Out and Outside In: Team Research in the Correctional Setting

by

Jon Marc Taylor
and
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ABSTRACT

Correctional research has traditionally relied on one of three approaches: 1) academic "experts" looking inward to prison organizations, personnel and inmates' 2) insiders (inmates and staff) looking out to inform the academic community; or 3) academics attempting to experience the correctional world. However, the most advantageous approach has rarely been utilized: team research by insiders and outsiders. This paper both advocates and serves to exemplify how academics and inmates can pool their expertise, perspectives and efforts to produce valid and valuable correctional research. An outline of such a team approach, identification of advantages and disadvantages, suggestions for team construction and authors' personal reflections of the process are discussed.

Criminal Justice and Criminological (CJC) studies have received increasing criticism from within the ranks of educators and practitioners and from without by everyone from advocates to politicians for the field's apparent lack of influence on, and explanation of, the nation's socially unacceptable high rate of crime. These criticisms, justified or not, have ranged from qualitatively deficient CJC curriculums (Korn, 1992) to selective exclusion of controversial or minority issues (Barak, 1991) to obfuscation of current knowledge (Bayley, 1991) to the lack of relevant research (Wallace, 1991). Conrad (1982) and Palmer (1983) observe that much of criminal justice research, correctional evaluations in particular, has been of mediocre quality. What research that is conducted to a large degree has been criticized as a statistical pyrotechnics of invalidated variables, descriptive treatises lacking causal generalizations, and "applying theory findings, if at all, ex post facto" (Berry, 1992:2). In short, the critics claim that the dedication of resources to CJC studies over the past three decades have produced little that is useful to solving the crime riddle.