

# Teabags, Tools and Getting my Hands Dirty: The Female Outsider in the Total (Male) Institution.

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the complex role that gender plays for the female researcher in a male prison. I reflect on how gender influenced my research outcomes and my experience of the field by drawing on ethnographic research in a total (male) institution. I found that whilst being female facilitated access and the building of relationships with participants it also posed challenges in the field. But more than the simple pros and cons of gender in the field, interestingly, the advantages of being a female were paradoxical. Whilst stereotypical female traits such as being nurturing and empathetic encouraged prisoners to open up, I gained respect and admiration by performing masculine activities such as using tools and, quite literally, getting my hands dirty.

## Introduction

The role of the researcher can have serious implications for how the field is perceived and how successfully a rapport can be built with participants. Liebling (1999) argues that the researcher is vitally important to the research end result. As such it is important to discuss the role of the researcher and situate their experiences inside the research findings and analysis. But this is not the only justification for exploring the role of the researcher. It is important to explore our roles within the research environment in order to present the problems, issues and advantages that can offer guidance to future ethnographers.

Jewkes (2012) calls for further reflection on matters of gender, emotion and prison research. She suggests that there may be certain dilemmas and anxieties engendered by being a woman in an institution dominated by men, with particular issues being self-presentation and professional credibility (Jewkes, 2012; Crewe, 2014). Crewe (2014) extends this idea and suggests that the experience of a female researcher in a men's prison or a male researcher in a women's prison brings with it a set of dynamics that are worthy of a great deal more comment. These experiences (and the resultant difficulties that arise) often disappear in published ethnographic monographs because:

‘Even researchers who acknowledge that ethnographies may (or should) be ‘messy texts’ (Marcus, 1998) must weigh complexity and ‘mess’ against legibility, publishability, and a mounting word count’ (Ugelvik, 2014, p. 472).

Jewkes (2012) argues that prison researchers should acknowledge the ‘emotional demands’ and ‘emotion work’ that prison ethnography entails; without this prison researchers are ‘doing a disservice to those who follow them . . . who frequently approach the field with high levels of anxiety’ (Jewkes, 2012, p. 64). As a 23 year old researcher (at the time of the field work) entering a prison setting was daunting and in all honesty quite frightening. I had no idea what to expect. It is hoped that the reflections in this paper may be of use to future prison ethnographers and ethnographers entering difficult and complex terrain who are dubious about entering a secreted environment. Crewe (2009) briefly discusses his experiences in the field but suggests that he does not want to be ‘self-indulgent’ in extensively discussing his own experiences, which is a common caveat of the autoethnography (Delamont, 2009). However, similarly to Ugelvik (2014, p.472), I would argue that ‘the purpose is not to write about myself and my experiences for their own sake, to engage in biographism or meaningless navel gazing, nor is it to simply share amusing (and embarrassing) anecdotes from the field’. Instead, it is hoped that by writing myself into the world that I have investigated and introducing my emotional and experiential accounts this paper can widen ethnographic analysis ‘in ways that make both the everyday life in a prison and the everyday life as a prison researcher visible in new ways.’ (Ugelvik, 2014, p. 472).

Johnson (1975) suggests that the fieldworker is ‘any man’ and that their personal characteristics, such as gender, have no bearing upon the development of trust in the research setting. However, like many researchers (Gurney, 1985; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2009) I found this not to be the case. In fact, gender and the personal characteristics of the researcher play a central role within the research. This paper will discuss the implications of being a female researcher in a total male institution. The in-depth nature of my research meant that I

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spent most of this time in close contact with prisoners, sitting with them, working with them, joking with them and eating lunch with them. It was found that whilst being female in this environment produced several challenges it simultaneously opened many doors and I would suggest that my gender played a vital role in obtaining candid data.

The research setting is described as a 'total male institution' drawing on Goffman's (1961) ideas of the total institution. This environment is dominated by men where sleep, work and play are all undertaken in the same place, with the same people. These men have little contact with women (women in plain clothing at least) during their incarceration. Thus, introducing a female into this environment will have an obvious impact. This not only affects the prisoners but also has implications for the solitary female researcher.

This paper will first provide a description of the research project in order to provide context to the discussion. This will follow with a review of the literature that has explored the role of gender in the research environment. I will then discuss the 'double edged sword' of being a female outsider in a total male institution.

## **The Research Project**

The research was conducted as part of an ESRC funded PhD. The primary focus of the research was to explore privately contracted prison work. The research aimed to build an understanding of what this work entailed, whether it was useful and how prisoners felt about conducting this work. An ethnographic approach was chosen to address these aims and subsequently access was granted to a large private prison in the UK, which for the purpose of this study is named '*Bridgeville*'. I was provided with my own set of prison keys enabling movement throughout all areas of the prison. The majority of the fieldwork was conducted in the prison industries department where privately contracted work and vocational learning took place. The fieldwork took place over ten months, between September 2012 and June

2013. During the study I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with prisoners and utilised both participant and non-participant observation through studying the workshops and participating in prison work. The narratives and examples in this paper have primarily been developed using interview transcripts and field notes. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the prison, staff and prisoners.

Whilst several senior level staff were female, the number of male staff members still outweighed female staff. Within the prison industries department around seventy five percent of the instructors were male. Amongst the small number of female instructors the majority were over the age of 50. As such, a new, young female in non-prison staff uniform was a novelty.

### **Gender and the Field: The Literature**

It is argued that ‘even when gender is a ‘constant’, it is still ‘constantly there’ (Williams and Heikes, 1993, p. 282; Spelman, 1988). Therefore, we must not question whether gender makes a difference but rather how it matters (Williams and Heikes, 1993). Gurney (1985) provides unassailable advice with regard to entering a male dominated environment as a female researcher. Drawing on her research of a prosecutor’s office, Gurney (1985) provides suggestions of how to manage being a woman in the field. She considered the challenges facing female researchers at a time when these issues were largely overlooked. Gurney (1985) also discussed issues of sexual hustling in the field where female researchers have to deal with sexual advances from males (Rovner-Pieczenik, 1976; Easterday, et al., 1977; Warren and Rasmussen, 1977). It is not only Gurney (1985) who provides such insights, Warren (Warren and Rasmussen, 1977) also provides advice in the realms of gender suggesting that wearing a wedding ring alleviated some of the problems as well as using the title ‘Dr’ to retain an ambiguous marital status. Easterday et al. (1977) suggest several ways

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in which women may face difficulty in a male dominated research environment. These include exclusion by all-male fraternities, sexual hustling, being treated as a gofer, being treated as a mascot and being treated with paternalism.

William and Heikes (1993) compared data from two independently conducted in-depth interview studies of male nurses, one by a female interviewer and one by a male. They noted that men framed their responses to questions differently depending on the gender of the interviewer. They found that 'people used the interviewer's gender as a cue to gauge the interviewer's orientations and opinions, and they developed their responses within that gendered context' (William and Heikes, 1993, p. 288).

More recent research has still found this to be the case; men and women are still likely to experience the field site differently (Horn, 1997; May and Patillo-McCoy, 2000; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2003; Lumsden, 2009; Mazzei and O'Brien, 2009; Soyer, 2014). Soyer (2014) found that she could utilise her role as mother to broaden her perspective in the field and build a rapport with participants. Utilising her 'mother' role also allowed her to desexualise her interactions with the young men in her study and build relationships without being considered a potential love interest. Several researchers have also recently discussed the issues of sexual hustling and sexist behaviour in the field (Gill and Maclean, 2002; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2003; Lumsden, 2009). Lumsden (2009) found that these experiences often altered her attitude towards participants. But still, she argues that the experience of gender dynamics in fieldwork do not always exclude female researchers (Bell, 1999). She found that being a female could occasionally enhance access (Lumsden, 2009).

These insights were exceptionally helpful in informing my research and abetting my movement and position in the research environment. The literature has illustrated not just how gender and the personal characteristics of the researcher affect the research findings but

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also how they can impact on the researcher and their personal experience of the field. This paper will go on to discuss some of these issues, acknowledging both the positive and negative impacts that gender had during my fieldwork. It is believed that this area of discussion deserves further consideration. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to this discussion by providing new insights into the impact gender has when researching a total male institution.

### **The Obscure Absence of Danger in Prison**

Once access to Bridgeville was secured, the issue of researcher safety needed to be addressed. The prison setting is viewed synonymously with danger. In 2012 there were 2,801 assaults on staff in male prisons throughout the UK and of these 252 were found to be serious assaults (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Informing my supervisor and university ethics committee that I would like to enter a prison was met with much hesitancy and concern. Throughout my fieldwork senior colleagues regularly asked me 'have you finished yet?' They were anxiously awaiting the end of my fieldwork to calm their nerves as they worried about my safety in Bridgeville. It is a difficult place for anyone to immerse themselves and watching a young female enter an institution filled with hundreds of men, many of which were in Bridgeville for violent crimes and were dealing with a lack of female company was likened to feeding me to the wolves. The field work was met with much trepidation and yet in ten months of fieldwork I felt surprisingly protected and safe in prison and this was something that I had not anticipated. This feeling of safety was not the result of the security systems and surveillance in Bridgeville it was in fact due to the etiquette and values of the majority of the prisoners. I would argue that it is possibly safer to be a female researcher in this environment than it is to be a male researcher as it was considered socially unacceptable to harm a woman by the

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majority of prisoners<sup>1</sup> that I met and I found that many prisoners were also highly protective of female staff members.

I spent a lot of time in one particular workshop where prisoners were tasked with breaking apart computers, separating the parts and sending them out to a private firm to be recycled. Prisoners used several tools to do this including hammers and screw drivers. Throughout the day small pieces of metal or plastic would fly through the air as a result of prisoners enthusiastically smashing a computer. On several occasions these pieces of plastic and metal flew in front of my face or even hit me. When this happened several of the prisoners I sat with would be outraged. They would look around to find out where this had come from and aggressively berate the person responsible for almost harming me. The 'traditional woman' tends to be viewed as harmless and unthreatening (Horn, 1997; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2003); women are seen as someone who must be protected (Horn, 1997). I was told by several prisoners that they would look after me as highlighted by this scenario. As such, in the total male institution the female stereotype of being frail and gentle worked to my advantage with regard to safety. I was non-threatening and the masculine culture within the prison made it so that most wanted to protect me.

Therefore, initially the prison setting was met with scepticism by both myself and colleagues at the university (because I was a small, young woman) but as the fieldwork developed these characteristics became advantageous in surviving in this setting and alleviating the potential for harm.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously there were exceptions to this but given the self-governing nature of the prison culture, those who did not internally adopt this idea, often externally proclaimed they did in order to follow the strict norms of the status quo.

## **Prison Dress Code**

Without falling too deeply into the gender stereotype, it is important to discuss the issue of dress within this setting and how the researcher's presentation of self is managed in the field (Goffman, 1971). I had made a decision at the start of my research not to enter the field in formal clothing. As suggested by previous research, where mode of dress distinguishes personnel at different levels of an organisation, the researcher should adopt the style of those with whom he/she wishes to be identified (Olesen and Whittaker, 1970; Bodgan and Taylor, 1975; Johnson, 1975; Gurney, 1985). Given that the basis of the research was to understand prison work primarily from the perspective of the prisoners it was important that they were comfortable around me and it is unlikely that formal clothing would have achieved this.

Prisoners enter the prison workshops wearing t-shirts and jogging bottoms and I wanted to mirror this informality in my dress. Usually when meeting new people in a work setting it is important to look smart and professional. In this total male institution it was the opposite. It was important to not look officious. Having an outsider enter the prison workshops can be suspicious enough, but a woman wearing smart clothing would have exacerbated this mistrust as it would have signalled authority. Therefore my basic fieldwork dress code consisted of jumpers and jeans and I hoped that this casual clothing would help me to appear more approachable.

The issue of formality was an important consideration when it came to dress but there was also the issue of drawing attention away from my gender through clothing. As noted by Soyer (2014) women find that their bodies are on display when they conduct fieldwork in male dominated settings and this was most certainly something I was aware of during my fieldwork. At the beginning of my research I was told to ensure that I did not have too much flesh on show. One manager at Bridgeville told me 'I don't mean you need to dress like a nun



but obviously be sure to cover up'. What did this mean? I thought it would go without saying that short skirts and low cut tops would be a serious faux pas in a male prison.

As a young female wearing make-up and styling my clothing is a daily ritual. This all changed when I entered Bridgeville. I entered wearing little to no make-up, unkempt hair and oversized jumpers to deemphasise my femininity (Soyer, 2014). In exploring organizational gender discourses, Trethewey (1999) found that many women lived in fear that they may lose hard-fought credibility as a result of their excessive sexual or undisciplined bodies as it is suggested that women never know when their bodies may display messages and meanings that were not intended. She found that professional women were concerned about finding strategies of self-presentation that were simultaneously engaging but not too inviting, soft but not weak, and interesting but not threatening. Similar organisational literature has also found that even when women choose not to be a 'sex object' at work their behaviour is still interpreted as sexual by men (Gutek, 1989; Sheppard, 1989). This was a concern for me during my research as I was very aware that I was most often the only woman in the workshop, I was always the only female wearing my own clothing and I was a similar age to the majority of prisoners in the workshops. I made every effort to bury my sexualised gender through informal clothing to avoid tarnishing the credibility of my research.

Despite my efforts to desexualise dress many prisoners commented on my appearance and occasionally sexual comments were made. It was not a concern over whether I was found attractive or not, it was more a concern as to whether I appeared to have made excessive effort for my own self-satisfaction and self-esteem. If this was perceived to be the case by prisoners it would be impossible to be taken seriously for the duration of the research and this would have negatively affected the credibility of the research and me, the researcher. For example, on one occasion, a prisoner approached me and told me how lovely I smelled and

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proceeded to guess the perfume that I was wearing. After this, I stopped putting perfume on each morning to avoid these types of compliments as they could sometimes be uncomfortable in this setting and could affect my ability to build a rapport conducive to gathering data. This would have been exacerbated had I worn more provocative, feminine clothing. Finding a healthy balance between appearing dishevelled and over-done was pivotal to building relationships with prisoners on an equal and respected level.

‘Dressing down’ therefore helped to achieve credibility and informality during my fieldwork which meant that prisoners respected my research and simultaneously felt comfortable around me. I was able to build relationships with participants on a more equal level using informal, desexualised dress.

I had carefully considered how my dress would affect prisoners (the focus of my research) but I had not fully taken into consideration how this may have been perceived by other setting members. Whilst dressing down performed its intended role of removing a stifled sense of professionalism this had an effect on prison staffs’ perceptions of my research because a certain respectable image that can often be achieved through clothing was lost. Dress coupled with my age and gender served to create an image that I was a young girl playing in a prison. However, although my age and gender presented challenges in Bridgeville, like Gurney (1985), I found that:

‘My youthful appearance and the fact that I was a graduate student and a woman helped create the impression that I was non-threatening and naïve. This combination may have helped alleviate setting members’ initial anxieties about having an observer in their midst’ (Gurney, 1985, p.47).

Therefore, these non-threatening attributes of being a young, naïve woman may have made it easier to gain access to this environment, but subsequently posed problems whilst in the field

with regard to sexuality, professionalism and credibility (Lofland, 1971; Wax, 1971; Rovner-Piecznik, 1976; Easterday, et al., 1977).

## **Gender as the Key to a Man's World**

When conducting his own prison ethnography Ugelvik (2014) had to make the first move when approaching prisoners which, he explains, could be quite awkward and uncomfortable. During my first week in Bridgeville it was rare that I had to approach a prisoner as a large number of them would surround me in each workshop, asking who I was and what I was doing there. They were incredibly curious about my presence as having a young female in the workshop was a novelty for the inhabitants of an all-male prison. This helped to ease me in to the field without having to deal with the specific 'awkwardness' that Ugelvik (2014) discusses.

Ugelvik (2014) also discusses how he needed to appear strong, masculine and be able to 'hold his ground'. This again was not the case for me. As I have suggested, being female meant that many prisoners felt the need to look after me. Acts of kindness were afforded to me by prisoners and efforts were made to integrate me into the group. Throughout my time at Bridgeville I was offered an excessive amount of tea and coffee each day by staff and prisoners. This was the standard protocol in Bridgeville as tea and coffee played an integral part of the day-to-day lives of prisoners and prison staff. The simple offering of tea and coffee is not noteworthy with regard to acts of kindness but on one occasion one prisoner went above and beyond to make me feel welcome. Each day prisoners are issued with a tea bag or coffee sachet in the workshop. This coffee/tea was regarded as substandard and many prisoners joked about its awful quality. As such, many prisoners would often smuggle<sup>2</sup> their own teabags into the workshop; brand-named tea bags that they had purchased from the

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<sup>2</sup> I use the word 'smuggle' as prisoners were not allowed to bring items from their cells into the workshop

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prison using their earnings from prison work. One morning the instructors in the workshop offered me a cup of tea which I accepted. One of the prisoners, Sam, saw that it was a prison issued teabag and frowned disapprovingly and said 'You shouldn't be drinking that rubbish!' Sam went back to his wing for lunch and on his return he approached me and sunk his hand deep into his pocket. He pulled out a handful of branded teabags and asked me to take them. This was an incredibly generous gesture as Sam earned £15 a week in this workshop which was usually used to call family and friends, to purchase snacks (as prison meals were reviled), cigarettes and branded tea bags. So of the little earnings that Sam had he bought branded tea bags and was kind enough to share them with me.

Kind acts such as this were common throughout my fieldwork. I was told I would be 'looked after' and I was often introduced to other prisoners with an opening line of 'this is Jenna, she's doing research here, she's alright she is'. I believe that this level of rapport would have been difficult to achieve had I been a male researcher. The intense macho culture within the prison suggests that an unknown male entering the prison would be met with more apprehension and less acceptance. Returning to Ugelvik (2014), he suggests that he needed to hold his ground amongst male prisoners and appear masculine in order to be accepted. In contrast many prisoners 'took me under their wing' and provided me with a certain level of acceptance, going out of their way to make me feel included. My gender undoubtedly was to thank for this.

Another key advantage of being a female researcher in a total male institution is that being female is often viewed synonymously with being 'caring'. In Rubin's (1975) study of working class family life, she attributed the intimate rapport she achieved with her male respondents to their greater experience expressing their feelings to women instead of men. Scully (1990) drew a similar conclusion during her study of convicted rapists, where she

suggested that despite the nature of the topic being crimes against women, her male participants seemed to find it easier and more natural to talk to her than to her male colleague. Martha Huggins argues that being seen as ‘forgiving’ and ‘nurturing’ possibly invited some interviewees to express stronger emotions (some participants began crying during interviews) (Huggins and Glebeek, 2003). This was also found by Gelsthorpe (1990) in her experience of researching male prisoners.

I was often positioned in the role of ‘mother’ (or at least mothering/ nurturing) or ‘sister’, someone that the men could confide in and talk to without fear that they would be ridiculed for expressing their emotions. One prisoner, Wally, was in the process of helping his mother fight for custody of his children as they were not considered safe with Wally’s ex-partner, the children’s mother. This was incredibly stressful to contend with whilst behind trapped behind bars and as such Wally liked to talk to me about the progress of this situation and tell me about how he was finding it. Despite me being an outsider Wally was more comfortable expressing his emotions to me than to male prisoners. Similarly, Jonesy, a seasoned Bridgeville prisoner was the life and soul of his workshop, he was always cracking jokes and ridiculing his friends in the workshop. However, when we talked alone he would tell me about how hard it was to be away from his son. He talked about being upset when his son would cry down the phone and tell Jonesy he missed him, as demonstrated in the following interview extract:

I was speaking to my little boy the other day, I don’t get emotional in here, I just don’t, my mum says all the time ‘you’re so strong up there (points to his head)’ but I was talking to my boy the other day and I was crying my eyes out because my nan she used to take us on holiday all the time, me, my brother and my sister, my nan phones my ex up and said ‘does he (Jonesy’s son) want to come to Spain with us?’ And he (the son) said no. So I phoned him and said ‘what’s the matter? Why don’t you want to go on holiday with Nan?’ and he said ‘I just loves you dad, I want to go with you.’ I said ‘I’ll call you back, I’ll call you back’ (as he had started to cry), it broke my heart. I can’t keep doing this to him it’s not fair’ (Jonesy, aged 25).

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During my fieldwork I found that publicly opening up in this way was a rarity for prisoners at Bridgeville. Like Rubin (1975) and Scully (1990) I found that these men seemed to be more comfortable expressing their feelings to a woman than to a man. Being able to talk through these problems with prisoners and provide some support meant that I was able to build stronger relationships which in turn made it easier for me to ask them about their work and address my research questions. This rapport also made them more responsive and receptive to these questions as they were comfortable in discussing a wide range of issues with me. I was exposed to prisoners machoism expressed in the workshop when they were in the company of other men and I was also exposed to their more personal emotions and attitudes when we met individually. Thus, the gender dynamics of the field built a more holistic picture of the participants in this study.

### **The Female Outsider: Getting My Hands Dirty**

I settled into Bridgeville to such an extent that it was a talking point amongst the instructors. Near the end of the research, during a conversation with one instructor, he told me that he remembered when I had started my research he had been on holiday and when he returned several of the other instructors had told him about a ‘young girl who they couldn’t believe was getting on so well and didn’t seem to be scared at all’. He commented ‘we’ve had big men come in here and they’ve been terrified and you didn’t bat an eyelid’.

Wherever possible, I socialised with prisoners and immersed myself into the prison culture and I gained much respect for this. For example, in one prison workshop, the waste management department, I would eat my lunch with prisoners<sup>3</sup>. The instructors ate their lunch in the staffroom with the door closed. Even though the instructors regularly asked if I would like to join them I always declined this offer and chose to eat my lunch with the

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<sup>3</sup> The waste management department was one of the few workshops that remained in the industries department during lunchtime.

prisoners. One afternoon the instructors told me that the prisoners had commented on this in admiration- it distinguished me from ‘the screws’<sup>4</sup> and allowed me to fit in and be more aligned with ‘the boys’ than with prison staff.

My level of participation in prison work also contributed to this. I joined in with the work in waste management. This work involved emptying the prison bins and separating the waste and items for recycling. This was incredibly messy and smelly work and a large number of the prison population avoided this job for these reasons. However, I worked alongside prisoners performing this job for several days, outside, in extremely cold January weather. The prisoners I worked alongside told me several times that no other staff member or visitor had ever worked with them before. This level of participation facilitated and accelerated the unearthing of candid data. I had earned participants respect for conducting this ‘manly’ work because it was assumed amongst prisoners that women would not be able to conduct this type of work or that women should not be ‘getting their hands dirty’.

I also gained respect and received ‘kudos’ for using tools in the workshop. In the workshop where prisoners broke apart computers I was applauded for ‘getting stuck in’ and ‘getting my hands dirty’. I regularly worked alongside prisoners hammering at computers and unscrewing bolts. One afternoon I was stood at a table with a group of prisoners, we were chatting and working simultaneously and during our conversation I interrupted one prisoner, Joe, to ask him to pass me a pair of pliers. He began to laugh and explained ‘I can’t believe I’m working with a girl who knows what pliers are called! That’s amazing, I’m going to ring my girlfriend later and tell her!’ The rest of the group joined in; they said they were impressed that I knew the name of these tools, how to use them and that I was happy to work with them on these tasks. I believe that the initial shock and subsequent admiration of me participating in this

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Screw’ is the colloquial, derogatory term used to describe prison staff by prisoners.

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messy work was exacerbated by the fact that I was female. Gender therefore played a vital role in obtaining candid data, ironically in juxtaposing ways. My non-threatening gender offered respite from the ego battles and the bolstering of masculinity which allowed me to engage with prisoners, whilst at the same time, my performance of stereotypical masculine activities served to improve my status as I gained respect for being a female performing masculine tasks.

### **The Problem of Rapport: Prisoners Curiosity**

I have discussed the benefits of being a female in a total male institution, distinctively the way that some traditional female characteristics worked in my favour by facilitating a safer environment, more receptive participants and helping me to gain a certain level of ‘kudos’ for entering a male prison as a female outsider and participating in their work. However, not all inherently female attributes worked in my favour. Some instead posed challenges for both the research outcomes and the researcher.

Prisoners were curious about my presence. Many were inquisitive about why I was there and what I was doing. They wanted to know about my research and what job I hoped to achieve from completing this research. These questions were a useful aspect of the relationship building. Prisoners were more comfortable around me once they felt they knew a bit more about me and it also gave me an opportunity to explain my research to them.

However, this level of curiosity coupled with the rapport that had been built also had its drawbacks. The prison population is mainly drawn from the local area, an area in which I also live. I was frequently asked where I lived and this would follow with a host of new questions asking for a more precise location, what car I drove, my partner’s job and where I socialised. This became difficult. Because I had built a rapport with participants, when I would not provide them with this information, many were offended. They were offended that I did not



trust them which obviously had a negative effect on our relationship. When I was not forthcoming in providing an answer to these questions it cemented the divide between myself and the prisoner and reinforced their role as 'prisoner' rather than 'participant'. Several researchers argue that rapport with respondents is sustained through exchange relationships (Wax, 1952; Golde, 1970; Lofland, 1971; Johnson, 1975; Danziger, 1979; Gray, 1980; Lofland and Lofland, 1984; Gurney, 1985) and as such, novice researchers are advised not to expect something for nothing (Gurney, 1985). Oakley (1981) encouraged the asking of personal questions from her participants which established 'a relatively intimate and non-hierarchical relationship' (Oakley, 1981, p. 47) but it is not always possible or safe to conduct research in this way in a total male institution.

The prisoner as a participant then poses problems when we view the research relationship in this way. It seems impertinent to expect a relationship to be built between the researcher and participant where information giving is unilateral. So, in order to build a reciprocal relationship, when prisoners opened up to me or provided me with information about themselves I needed to respond by providing information about myself (but without putting myself in a vulnerable position). I would instead generate conversations about what food I liked and what television shows I watched to build relationships with participants based on common interests. Food was a fervent topic as prisoners often told me how much they detested prison food<sup>5</sup>. Many loved to discuss their favourite fast food restaurants or home cooked meals and plan what they would eat first once they were released. Building relationships in this way seemed to work well and this generated a lot of conversations and discussions without compromising my safety.

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<sup>5</sup> A recent prison report found that the vast majority of prisoners were very negative about the quality and quantity of food in prisons (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2013-2014)

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Avoiding awkward situations and uncomfortable questions was difficult but what was ironically more difficult were the issues that arose from feeling comfortable in this environment with this group of participants. I spent a lot of time chatting and working with certain individuals, individuals that I grew to like, respect and to some extent trust. Within ten months of conversations, with a group of people that were very often shrewd, they were able to deduce particular information about me from blasé comments that I made. They would remind me that they had figured this information out, not to threaten, simply to assert their intelligence.

Ironically, whilst I felt safe inside Bridgeville, I started to feel less safe at home. When I left the field the realisation that I was spending each day with prisoners would sink in. In the evening, after a day of fieldwork in Bridgeville I would sit at home and panic over comments that I had made that day. I was regularly anxious about how my day had gone, had I upset anyone? Would they know where I lived? Had I given them too much information about myself? This anxiety was exacerbated when prisoners told me the areas of the city that they would 'go robbing', one of which was where I lived. Although I felt relatively safe inside prison I felt vulnerable when I walked outside the prison gates. I left my prison keys and took off my 'researcher hat' and picked up my car keys and put on my 'civilian hat'. This demonstrates the dangers that have the possibility of transcending the field. Because of this I wondered whether prisoners would treat me with the same courtesy outside prison as they did inside prison. In Bridgeville prisoners were governed by a masculine code to protect women. This was enforced and fostered by prisoners. Would this still extend beyond the prison walls when I was no longer a novelty and prisoners were not governed by the same rules?

## **Barriers to the Female Outsider in the Total Male Institution**

As well as the issues that arose due to prisoners' curiosity there were several difficulties that arose due to being a female and an outsider in an environment dominated by men. These issues will be discussed in the following section.

### **The *Female Outsider***

Generally, prisoners were extremely cooperative with my research. When asked to participate in interviews several said that they wanted to participate so that they could help me and several made comments of this nature at the end of their interview:

I hope I gave you a good perspective and covered what it's like (Neil, aged 48).

I hope you get your qualifications in what you want to do (Jake, aged 22).

Several prisoners spent a lot of time teaching me to perform tasks in the workshops and overall prisoners were extremely accommodating. This cooperative attitude was not adopted by one of the workshop instructors. It was ironic, entering this environment that was considered dangerous and unnerving, that I faced my greatest difficulties with prison employees rather than the prisoners themselves.

One instructor in particular had a discernible problem with my presence in the workshop. It was as if a female would only enter a prison playing the role of seductress. I was made to feel embarrassed and my research was undermined constantly in this workshop. I was frequently reminded that 'some of the boys had taken a liking to me'. One afternoon while chatting to a group of prisoners, the instructor shouted across the workshop 'you're all sat around her like she's on fire and you're roasting marshmallows!' He reprimanded several of the prisoners for talking to me, telling them to get on with their work. He told them that he was going to have me removed from the workshop as I was a distraction (despite the fact that on this particular

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occasion the private contract had not delivered any work so prisoners were sat around reading and playing draughts). When I asked him if he felt I was causing difficulties in the workshop he told me that he was simply teasing the prisoners. This made my research very difficult to undertake in this particular workshop as prisoners were made to feel that they would be scolded for talking to me, or worse, humiliated in front of me and the other prisoners. As Trethewey (1999) suggests, women cannot escape from the sexual embodiment of gender and altering these sexualised perceptions can be difficult. It is unlikely that a male researcher would face the same difficulty in this environment but it is important to note that the difficulty faced with this particular instructor was an anomaly and generally the instructors were accommodating.

Whilst this was the only instructor that I came across that seemed to be intentionally drawing attention to my gender and creating this difficulty, several instructors inadvertently did this also. For example, although swearing is an everyday part of prison life, when I entered the workshops, prisoners were frequently reprimanded for swearing in front of me. In most cases they were told 'don't swear in front of Jenna' or 'don't swear in front of the lady' despite the fact that I did not want prisoners to adjust their behaviour because of my presence. But this was to be expected; having an outsider within the workshop meant that behaviour was altered. No matter how successfully I was able to build relationships I was still a female outsider.

This was also reinforced on the (rare) occasions in which prisoners made inappropriate comments towards me. Like many other female researchers (Gurney, 1985; Lumsden, 2009) I occasionally experienced sexual hustling which involved flirtatious behaviour, inquiries into my relationship status (with a follow up question often asking whether my boyfriend approved of me spending my day with male prisoners or whether he would be covetous of

this) and sexually suggestive remarks. For example, when I approached prisoners to ask them to participate in interviews two prisoners responded by asking: 'does it mean that I get to be alone in a room with you?' As a result of these comments I automatically excluded these prisoners from interviews as a precautionary measure for my own safety.

### ***The Female Outsider***

Becoming an insider or an outsider is often a concern for researchers (Reeves, 2010). Despite the benefits obtained through in-depth participation and the trust that was built between the researcher and participants, the level of acceptance will always be limited. There are two key reasons for this lack of complete immersion, firstly, being female and secondly, being an outsider. With regard to being female, the prison environment is a highly masculine environment (Harvey, 2007; Hua- Fu, 2005) and whilst most were comfortable and welcoming I was still not completely accepted due to the fact that I was not male. I did not join in when discussing 'sexual conquests' or banter surrounding the male anatomy which meant that I could not be 'one of the lads' and as such my level of acceptance was limited. With regard to being an outsider I could never be fully accepted by prisoners because at 5pm when they went back to the wings I went home. This inevitably limited my level of participation and acceptance. I was not considered one of them, despite gaining their trust meaning that my findings come from a position of 'trusted outsider' rather than 'insider'.

I made every effort to obtain this position as 'trusted outsider' by making simple adjustments such as sitting alone when I ate lunch in the staff canteen. A handful of prisoners worked in the staff canteen and I did not want them to think that I was befriending staff members as staff were often viewed as the enemy. Sitting amongst prison staff would cement my position as 'screw', a friend of the officers and as a result a non-trusted outsider. There would be an assumption that what prisoners told me would be passed on to staff members. Instructors and

staff members often asked if I would like to join them for lunch but I brought books and politely replied that I had a lot of work to catch up on during lunch.

In the context of the female *outsider*, I also had to consider the symbolic meaning of holding my own set of prison keys and the simple luxury of being able to open and close doors.

Although obtaining a set of personal prison keys was a crucial step to obtaining exhaustive data this level of freedom and control was occasionally met with cynicism. Holding keys meant that I was able to come and go as I pleased, a great advantage for myself but a privilege that is not afforded to the prisoners. Having keys marked me out immediately (Jewkes, 2012) and initially I was often branded as a member of staff by prisoners. This created an initial barrier. I had to assure prisoners that I did not work for the prison and I was not digging for information that would get them into trouble. But I was also not there to help them in their day-to-day problems. I had no power or influence amongst the prison staff and so the role of researcher meant that I could not move them to a different workshop, I could not get them a job on the wings and I could most certainly not get them a pay increase (no matter how often they asked). However, due to the long period of time I spent in the Bridgeville's workshops it became clear to participants that my role was not staff, not prisoner, but that I occupied the ambiguous role of researcher.

I did not identify with the Bridgeville employee nor the prisoner 'as a prison ethnographer you're reminded each and every day (as you leave your key in the automatic key safe and leave the prison, knowing that you can come and go as you please) that you are member of a 'group of one'' (Jacobs, 1977; Ugelvik, 2014, p. 478).

## **Conclusion**

Given the 'egos at play' and the performances of masculinity that are a key aspect of prison life, my non-threatening gender offered respite from this. The perception that I was

'feminine' and thus would most likely be caring and empathetic meant that many prisoners were keen to talk to me which allowed me to build stronger relationships with participants and receive more candid responses. This enhanced my data and also created a more comfortable and safer environment in which to conduct my fieldwork. Paradoxically, it was not only the 'feminine' traits that strengthened my research experience. My participation in the more masculine activities in the workshop also served to improve my reputation amongst setting members and allowed me to be more included. This again enhanced my data and the feelings of safety and ease in the research setting. As a female, utilising my feminine characteristics served to build rapport and thus gather data more easily. Performing masculine activities, as a woman, helped earn respect.

Nevertheless, as an outsider, my insights would still be limited. Being a female researcher within this total male institution it was inevitable that I would experience both the advantages and disadvantages of marginality (Papanek, 1964; Easterday et al, 1977; Danziger, 1979; Thorne, 1979). But this marginality was turned into an asset by preserving a degree of detachment from setting members. This detachment provided insights and opportunities that could not have been attained had I 'gone native' (Gurney, 1985).

This paper has brought to light some of the key issues that must be considered when entering a total male institution or any research setting in which the researcher is vulnerable both in terms of the researcher's wellbeing and marginality particularly in circumstances in which rapport is essential to the research findings. It is hoped that these insights will be helpful for future ethnographers. Whilst embarking upon ethnographic research is exciting it can also involve feelings of anxiety and confusion. Knowing that others have faced these same difficulties and also found ways of coping with and adapting to them can be a comfort in what can be considered a very lonely practice.

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