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Finding Secrets and Secret Findings: Confronting the Limits of the Ethnographer's Gaze¹

Deborah H. Drake

Introduction

Ethnography, inevitably, can only provide a partial account of the culture, society or field under study. James Clifford (1986: 7) wrote, 'Even the best ethnographic texts ... are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control.' Here, Clifford was referring to the *construction* of ethnographic writing and the fact that ethnographers inevitably must translate the reality of informants into a finished, narrative account. It is the ethnographer who ultimately chooses what to include or exclude in their authored expression of the cultures, lives and meanings that were observed and described to them in the field. Far from threatening the empirical value of the ethnographic endeavour, its partial nature can mirror 'the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive' (p.6). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 255) argue, 'The relationship between the ethnographic text and its subject-matter may not be entirely straightforward. But it is not totally arbitrary ... There are social actors and social life outside the text, and there are referential relationships between them.'

The limitations and partiality of ethnography are aspects of the craft that must be acknowledged by the ethnographer throughout the whole of the research process. Both the collection and the *interpretation of the meaning* of particular narratives within the society or culture being studied are fundamental to the practice of ethnography, and it is these narratives that form the substance of evocative and nuanced ethnographic representation. However, during an ethnographic endeavour, some stories from the field only seem to emerge in fragments or as partial accounts from a single informant. Some of these narratives are verifiable and 'factual' – for example, when an informant describes an incident or event they shared with someone else. The framing and meaning of the event will, of course, be imbued

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with the subjective experience of the storyteller(s), but the basic facts of the narrative can be corroborated through other sources. There are other stories or cultural practices, however, that an ethnographer might begin to uncover that will be difficult to verify, such as when an informant discloses or hints at a guarded secret. Moreover, an ethnographer may piece together fragments of a story from the field that informants want to actively keep hidden. During ethnographic work, the researcher sometimes has a sense of or hears the whisper of a taboo subject or an underground cultural practice that informants will not confirm and which has not been directly observed by the ethnographer himself or herself. Secret, taboo or more 'deviant' aspects of a given society, culture or organisation are always the most difficult to research and capture. Whilst the study of underground practices or activities may not be the focus of a particular ethnographic study when the ethnographer becomes aware that something clandestine may be going on, it can be troubling because it may suggest that she has not achieved full acceptance, has failed to gain a sense of mastery over the field (Drake and Harvey, 2014) or something meaningful is being missed.

In this chapter, I consider the moments during ethnographic practice when realities or meanings are 'glimpsed at', but are not fully revealed to the researcher. To do so, I draw on ethnographic research experiences during two projects conducted in English men's maximum-security prisons (see Drake, 2012; 2014). I consider some of the moments during these projects when organisational secrets seemed to emerge but which could not be fully verified. In the closed, secretive and often paranoid environment of the prison, some aspects of the field can remain obscured to the outsider researcher, no matter how much time he or she spends with informants or observing in the field. The chapter considers the potential relationship between the conditionality of prison officer collegial culture and the emergence of 'dark' practices. It is argued that the deep, enduring tensions between care and custody, brutality and punishment that can accompany the prison officer role can also create structures and spaces in which hidden practices can be both exercised and kept hidden. A particular focus of the chapter is to consider the challenges for the ethnographer when only a sliver view of clandestine practices is obtained.

Secrecy in groups and organisations

Simmel (1950: 463) provided the first sociological theorisations of secrecy and argued that it was a 'universal sociological form' – meaning that the potentially negative contents of a

secret are, in some respects and in many situations, irrelevant. It is the significance of secrecy in the maintenance of social structure that Simmel was concerned with. Goffman (1959: 142), likewise, discussed the importance of 'inside' secrets, 'whose possession marks an individual as being a member of a group and helps the group feel separate and different from those individuals who are not "in the know" '. He further stated: 'Inside secrets give objective intellectual content to subjectively felt social distance.' Thus, as Simmel (1950) also noted, even though the content of a secret may be incidental, it is the exclusion from possession of it that gives a secret its cultural and psychological power. Secrets bind individuals together whilst simultaneously excluding 'outsiders'.

The interpersonal and social significance of secrets is an area under-considered in the research literature. However, recent sociological research on secrecy in organisations has been conducted by Chris Grey (2014), who considered the power and strength of secrecy in relation to one of the most secretive operations in living memory – the workings of Bletchley Park during World War II. Grey's analyses of Bletchley Park are based on declassified papers, interviews with veterans and published, publicly available first-hand accounts of Bletchley. This historical and sociological work on Bletchley Park offers insights on aspects of social, cultural and organisational secret keeping that have previously and perhaps inevitably been limited due to the inherent difficulty associated with researching organisational secrets and secret organisations.

Grey (2014) examines the culture of secrecy which operated at Bletchley. He outlines the instructions staff were given on matters of secrecy, the security checks they were subjected to, the conventions of 'not telling' and 'not asking' that developed and the 'rigid compartmentalisation of work and restriction of information ... that was central to [Bletchley Park]' (p.112). Grey notes the apparently durable seal of this secrecy culture and its longevity beyond the closure of Bletchley and draws out the elements that seemed to secure the strong secrecy culture that was established there.

In further work on processes of secrecy, Costas and Grey (2014) examine the theoretical and social dynamics of secrecy, as opposed to the informational aspects of secrets. By so doing, they make clear the power that secrets or, more precisely, 'secret keeping' can wield within organisations. They take a neutral approach to examining secrecy in organisations, choosing analytical examples that are not compromised by moral considerations of the secrets themselves or by salacious examples which may be drawn from

secret organisations. By examining secrecy as a social process (as opposed to examining the informational elements of secrets themselves), Costas and Grey are able to hone in on the interpersonal dynamics that surround secrecy in organisations. Thus, they illustrate that the mere act of secret keeping wields power and results in organisational consequences that are entirely independent of the information that is being kept secret. They argue:

Secrecy is constituted through social interactions and, specifically, needs to be understood in terms of its conditions and consequences for identity and control. By depicting social process in terms of conditions and consequences we suggest that what is at stake is not a linear cause-and effect relationship but an ongoing, iterative dynamic relationship. (Costas and Grey, 2014: 2)

Two particular social ‘stakes’ are identified by Costas and Grey in relation to secrecy: identity, and the capacity of secrecy to establish in-groups and out-groups, and control, and the way power can be maintained by secret keeping. With respect to identity, they suggest that a social understanding of secrecy recognises that ‘secrecy is not just about the legitimate or illegitimate concealment of valuable information, but is also about the social aspects of organizational life, such as the cementing of group identity’ (p.8). Being trusted to keep a secret has the capacity to make people feel special and important, and thus it also has an impact on individual identity. With respect to control, the work of Grey (2014) and Costas and Grey (2014) make it clear that secrecy is often highly associated with the exercise of social power. Placing limitations on the sharing of information can be a means by which interests and boundaries are protected. The keeping of secrets can create the impression of special knowledges in order to bolster power. Thus, the work of both Grey (2014) and Costas and Grey (2014) make it clear that practices of secrecy can impact heavily on both group and personal identities and that acts of secret keeping enable, exert and require control.

The issue of secrecy has been discussed in the ethnographic literature by a few researchers in relation to family secrets (Poulos, 2008), religious communities of Indonesia (George, 1993) and Africa (Diamitani, 2011) and the archive on the secret police in Romania (Verdery, 2013). In addition, there have also been a number of studies in sociology and criminology which have discussed the ethical dilemmas of encountering corrupt practices in the field, particularly in relation to policing (Norris, 1993; Reiner, 2000; Marks, 2004; Rowe, 2007). Whilst some of these accounts discuss the difficulty a researcher faces in gaining access to private information or how to ethically respond to the discovery of hidden practices,

there are few that focus explicitly on encounters with secrecy (but see also Chapter 14 in this volume, where Rhodes discusses some related ideas). Goffman (1959: 141) discussed the desire of both individuals and groups to engage in ‘information control’ wherein a given audience is not provided with ‘destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them’. Goffman states: ‘a team must be able to keep its secrets and have its secrets kept.’

Noticing forms of secret keeping amongst a group is not necessarily unexpected during an ethnography. However, encountering secret keeping that seems to cloak negative or possibly corrupt information or practices presents ethical and practical challenges for the ethnographer (as the policing literature attests, see Norris, 1993; Marks, 2004). Whilst there are different types of secrets that a group or organisation might hold, this chapter is primarily concerned with what Goffman identifies as ‘dark secrets’. These are secret facts about an organisation, group or subgroup that are incompatible with the image that the group wants to convey. Goffman argues that such dark secrets are ‘double secrets’, stating that ‘one is the crucial fact this is hidden and another is the fact that crucial facts have not been openly admitted’. For the ethnographer encountering the suggestion of a ‘dark secret’, the ‘crucial fact’ of the secret may or may not be meaningful or worthy of exposure and condemnation, but finding a hidden sphere of the field presents a frustrating dilemma for the ethnographer.

Secrecy in high-security prisons

The illustrative examples I will outline in this chapter are drawn from two related research projects (see Drake, 2012; 2014). The initial project was an ethnographic study of prison life in two English maximum-security prisons (Full Sutton and Whitemoor) in 2005. The subsequent study, which took place from 2007 to 2009, was an extension of the first and included the other three English long-term, maximum-security prisons (Frankland, Wakefield and Long Lartin). This second study, however, was conducted in collaboration with prison officers, who I had trained in ethnographic methods. The purpose of this second study was, in part, concerned with understanding the meaning and experience of imprisonment for prisoners. But it was also concerned with providing prison officers with an opportunity to gain a more nuanced understanding of prisoner experiences through ethnography (see Part III of this volume for examinations of the relationship between ethnography and practice). The scope, methods and dilemmas of this project are discussed more fully in a study by Drake

(2014). This chapter is my first written attempt to consider material that is gleaned from the field during both of these research projects and which relates to hidden or ‘underground’ elements of prison life and prison officer culture. Before doing so, however, I first set the scene by considering the ‘security environment’ which permeates maximum-security prisons in England and the role that secrecy sometimes plays in these prisons.

From the moment you reach the outer gate you feel the intensity of the environment. Staff wait in long queues as everyone arrives for their shift at the same time. Officers speak of feeling concerned about reaching their wing on time, but no one *really* wants to enter the prison early to avoid being late. At the gate, staff pass through full body metal detectors, are physically wanded down² and on occasion are randomly searched by hand. After being searched, officers re-fasten watches, belts, staves, key pouches and chains, and groups of staff are slowly fed into the prison through the airlock³. After queuing again to retrieve keys and radios everyone must then face long walks through a countless series of doors and gates to get to their home departments or wings. The oppressive environment hangs in the air as groups of staff trudge through hollow and austere concrete corridors. (Excerpt from field notes)

As the above field note excerpt indicates, the volume of security measures in maximum-security prisons in England can be felt simply upon entering these establishments. There is a seemingly endless array of procedures, systems, codes and contingency plans all concerned with maintaining security. There is a tangible tension in the atmosphere that is the result of a focused emphasis on security, rooted in institutional memory and manifest in an underlying sense of anxiety – amongst the staff – of the potential of what might happen in the event of a serious incident, escape or the outbreak of disorder. Across the five long-term, maximum-security prisons, the staff operate under a constant background of ‘potential disaster’. In these prisons, the anticipation of what might hypothetically ‘go wrong’ has seemingly become inextricably intertwined with organisational as well as living memory of real incidents that actually had occurred (e.g. serious assaults, riots or escapes) in the past and the consequences that subsequently resulted (see Drake, 2006; 2012). Recollections and frequently told narratives originating in lived institutional experience of terrifying incidents with riotous prisoners, serious staff assaults or the fall-out from previous high-profile escapes hold real purchase in staff cultures and in the minds of individual members of staff. The accumulated

² Being ‘wanded down’ means having a hand-held metal detecting wand passed over you.

³ An airlock consists of two airtight doors, in series and with a chamber between, which do not open simultaneously.

history of disorder in long-term maximum-security prisons in England is important to understanding the cultural structures that have come to shape what I have described elsewhere as the ‘habitus’ of maximum security (Drake, 2011), wherein almost every aspect of maximum-security prison life has come to be viewed through the filter of security.

Security maintenance, as practiced through intelligence gathering, surveillance, searching procedures or other physical security measures, orients so much of the daily working lives of prison staff that it can create a kind of ‘security thinking’ that seems to spread, as if contagious, to almost every aspect of prison work. Although it might be expected that the concept of security would be inextricably associated with practices of secrecy, this was not necessarily the case in all aspects of the day-to-day practices of high-security prison staff, particularly when it related to information about the general population of prisoners. For example, intelligence information about prisoners was fairly freely shared amongst members of staff and with their managers (and in the presence of this prison ethnographer). Presumably the relative powerlessness of prisoners and the operational goal of maintaining security and (as a result, control) meant that certain kinds of ‘intelligence’ information were willingly and unproblematically shared with anyone who was inside the prison but who was not a prisoner. However, practices of secrecy were apparent in other aspects of high-security prison work.

There were some formally sanctioned secrecy practices in high-security prisons which were a matter of routine. For example, the management of high-profile prisoners who were also categorised as ‘high risk’ often involved the need for secrecy around their movements or other arrangements to do with their secure custody. In addition, at the time of the research, high-security prisons had groups of staff called Dedicated Search Teams (DST), which, in some respects, fulfilled a policing role within each prison. These teams, as a matter of routine, could turn their sights on both individual prisoners and individual members of staff or wider staff or prisoner groups (e.g. through unannounced searching of staff or prisoner areas or through clandestine intelligence gathering operations) in the interests of maintaining security.

Formally sanctioned secrecy practices coupled with the heavy security focus in maximum-security prisons could serve to create an atmosphere of tension, paranoia and distrust not just between staff and prisoners but also amongst individual members of staff and different staff groups. This was especially true if the security regime turned in on itself,

which could occur exceptionally when a member of staff was suspected of inappropriate behaviour with prisoners or other prohibited actions undertaken during the course of their duties. Secrecy then became a paramount concern to the few members of staff who were investigating the matter, and thus the control of information became crucial, as the secrecy of the operation played a key role in the gathering of evidence. However, operations such as these planted seeds of distrust that could divide some staff groups quite significantly. For example, in two of the maximum-security prisons in which I conducted research, the DST were viewed with hostility by a number of staff due to the surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities they sometimes conducted on staff. The DST seemed to have a reputation not dissimilar to an 'internal affairs' department that is concerned with identifying corruption or other illegitimate or inappropriate practices. Thus, some members of staff would actively (though clandestinely) attempt to undermine or besmirch the reputation of the DST – either as a group or individually.

In addition to the formal and official uses of secrecy in high-security prisons, informal secret keeping was also apparent within and between staff groups. Moreover, the tension of the maximum-security prison environment seemed to create a potent atmosphere for the proliferation of practices of secrecy, which, in turn, played a role in creating and maintaining in-group and out-group affiliations between staff groups. The strength of certain elements of the staff cultures that operated in high-security prisons meant that individual members of staff or staff groups who undertook duties or exhibited attitudes that contradicted firmly held beliefs within the wider prison officer culture could be viewed with deep mistrust by other members of staff (see also Crawley and Crawley, 2008; Sim, 2008). For example, staff who delivered rehabilitative or 'offending behaviour programmes' or those who ministered to prisoners' health-care needs were sometimes viewed with suspicion by pockets of the wider staff group. These members of staff could be seen as 'insider-outsiders' and, as a result, were sometimes labelled by other groups of staff as 'untrustworthy' or 'not one of "us"'. Staff who were thus labelled would not enjoy the same levels of camaraderie in the workplace as some of their colleagues, and due to their perceived 'sympathy' with prisoners, they were excluded from informally defined staff cliques who, for example, actively concerned themselves with the punishment of prisoners – either in conversation or in the way they carried out their duties. At the extreme end of these invisible dividing lines within the staff culture, 'out-group' staff could be ostracised and subjected to harassment or bullying. Bullying between members of staff took place in private, and these practices were,

unsurprisingly, shrouded in secrecy. Likewise, the members of staff who were preoccupied with the punishment of prisoners were more closed off and seemingly secretive towards anyone who was deemed an ‘outsider’ (either as a member of staff or as an ethnographer), and their ranks could close very quickly if questions about their practices were raised.

The bullying of certain members of staff and the suggestion of cultural practices that seemed to be explicitly oriented towards the punishment of prisoners blurs into secrecy of another kind – the intentional obscuring of inappropriate or prohibited practices. These categories of practices can be the most difficult for the ethnographer to observe because they require the admission of and exposure to carefully guarded secrets. Uncovering deviant practices in prisons is a complex, multilayered and high-stakes task. Such practices may range along a scale that, at one end, includes more transgressive acts, which are not illegal, but are in contradiction to policy or staff culture and, at the other, include activities which are, in fact, legally prohibited. In either case, these activities are the ‘double secrets’ that Goffman (1959) identified (referred to above) and which staff groups will closely guard and deny when questioned about them.

Encountering ‘Dark’ secrets in the field

The parts of a cultural landscape that may be blanketed or kept secret by members of a group should be respected by the ethnographer when privacy surrounding a particular issue appears to be collectively agreed and/or culturally important because the exposure of such secrets is not always necessary in gaining a deep and nuanced understanding of the field or culture being studied. However, there are other situations when an ethnographer might begin to uncover hidden stories that are seemingly distressing or deeply meaningful for certain individuals or a group of informants. Under these conditions, uncovering concealed strands within the matrix of cultural practice can facilitate prisms and depths of understanding that would otherwise be one dimensional and shallow. At the same time, however, conducting ethnographic research in closed institutions or other hard-to-access settings is a rare privilege that may be accompanied by a responsibility to call attention to practices which would raise public alarm. Despite the potential vital importance of uncovering hidden practices or narratives, doing ethnography is complexified when the ethnographer happens upon only a hint that there are cultural practices that are clandestine and cannot gather ‘hard evidence’ of either their presence or their absence.

The hidden area of prisons, which I want to focus on first, seemed to lie beneath the more apparent and sometimes blatant conditionality of prison officer culture, briefly discussed in the last section of this chapter (also see Crawley and Crawley, 2008). The existence of clique-like subgroups amongst prison officers could create an unmistakable atmosphere that gave the impression that there were fine layers of cultural practices that needed to be carefully observed and peeled back:

It is startlingly evident that an individual prison establishment is a collection of many different cultures and micro-climates. Each residential area or wing seems to have its own atmospheric texture and each can feel uniquely different, as though you are moving between entirely different prisons each time you enter a different residential unit. This change of atmosphere seems attributable as much to the 'society of staff' as it is 'the society of captives', although wing design, layout and facilities seem to play important roles too. Moreover, the 'society of staff' allocated to a residential location in a prison changes according to shifts, with different teams working together on different shift patterns. Staff teams are often organised through 'divisions' or 'divs' that include a core team who all tend to work the same shift pattern on a given wing. A wing might, therefore, have two 'divisions' of staff, where, for example, 'Red Div' is allocated to one shift pattern and 'Black Div' is allocated to another (though this specific language differs from prison to prison). Thus, there are sometimes micro-climates within microclimates wherein the atmosphere of a wing might change fairly significantly, depending on which 'Div' is working. (excerpt from field notes)

The atmospheric changes, described above, can be clearly observed and felt not only by an 'outsider' – for example, the ethnographer – or by prisoners, but also by other prison officers who may be randomly allocated to a particular wing in order to make up the numbers (due to staff shortages or sickness, for example). Whilst, on one hand, prison officers will often verbally describe their collegial relationships as cohesive and supportive, they will, on the other hand, sometimes ignore or ostracise certain members of the staff group. Crawley (2004: 185–198) has discussed group rivalry in and between prisons. Prison staff will often fiercely defend the establishment in which they work in the presence of prison officers from other prisons. However, at a local level, wing-to-wing rivalries between groups of staff are common.

I am on [X] Wing all day today. It is hard going. I am currently in the centre office [where officers are often located] and I feel tension, as though I am unwelcome. A governor grade has just come in. The tension does not improve. She asks one of the officers if all is well on the wing. She receives a perfunctory: 'all present and correct.' She acknowledges me and asks if I am getting what I need. I say: 'I'm just

getting a feel for things.’ She seems to want to leave and does so. After she has left, the member of staff she was speaking to phones a colleague to let them know she is on her way. The conversation is curt and factual, I suspect because I am there and he should not be ‘warning’ his colleague that a governor is on her way...

...

It is now evening and a member of staff has come for the evening shift who is not normally allocated to this wing. He is not made to feel welcome either. He seems reluctant to speak openly to me here, although we have spoken before and he has been quite friendly. He suggests we perhaps speak somewhere else, another time. He doesn’t look comfortable here. I go off to spend association time with the prisoners. [excerpt from field notes]

The wing described above had a reputation for being a ‘bad wing’ by staff due, they argued, to the ‘nature’ of the prisoner population allocated there. Prisoners on this wing were described by staff as being exceptionally dangerous and hard to manage. However, the prisoners described the staff as being inflexible, unhelpful and, at times, brutal. The member of staff referred to in my field notes who worked the evening shift, but did not normally work on that wing, subsequently discussed with me how ostracised he felt whenever he had to work there. He was a newer member of staff and felt he had not yet earned the respect of his colleagues, especially those on that particular wing. This, he felt, was specifically related to the way he spoke to prisoners, which was with courtesy and respect. His experiences spoke to the fact that some ‘in-group, out-group’ delineations were drawn by staff on the basis of conflicting approaches and attitudes to prison officer work. Where these divisions existed, hostilities and divisions between colleagues could develop and were apparent.

Yes I think it can be clique-y and I think it depends where you work. Some areas are more clique-y than others, some wings are more clique-y than others. The thing that annoys me the most about this job is that the more you try to better yourself or diversify the more you become ostracised. So I think that is the most really, really annoying thing about this job. (Prison Officer)

The division of opinion amongst prison officers on the different ways of performing the role of prison officer is well reported in the research literature (Crawley and Crawley, 2008; Scott, 2008; Sim, 2008; Liebling, Price and Shefer, 2010; Tait, 2011). During my own ethnographic work in prisons, the most obvious divisions often arose in relation to what was viewed by the dominant staff groups as the ‘right way’ of speaking to prisoners:

I would say it is more with the interacting with prisoners, where you see it the most. We got trained, that you need to go out there and talk to prisoners etc., etc. – to build up dynamic security, but you don't see that as much. There are officers who just ... very rarely do you see them talking to prisoners or maybe they do talk to them, but they talk to them differently to what I do and it's a bit of an 'us' and 'them' sometimes. If you are breaking that, it's not looked upon well ... I have heard it mentioned around the jail, guys who have worked on other wings who talk to prisoners and people say: 'what are you doing? We don't do that here or you don't address them as Mr.' There is an officer who trained with me and calls every prisoner Mr and his name is being bandied around and he's been told not to do it. (Prison Officer)

Disclosures of this nature, coupled with observations of staff divisiveness and the 'insider-outsider' positioning between some prison officers provided a glimpse into aspects of the conditionality of prison officer collegial relationships that seemed only to scratch the surface.

During both research studies, the staff who more openly spoke about the potentially conditional nature of prison officer culture were those who delivered offending behaviour programmes (though they were not the only members of staff who seemed to experience ostracism, at times). These staff were often viewed by the main body of discipline staff as 'care bears' or conversely as 'con shy'.

... the wing I was on wasn't too bad, it was more off-wing, other people looking at that wing and saying: 'oh you work with nonces⁴ and stuff' because they were sex offenders ... There is still a bit of that there, but it is not as out in the open, it is not as blatant, it is not as obvious. (Prison Officer)

It was, perhaps, easier for those who worked on programme delivery to discuss the difficulties they had with some of their colleagues because they had support from fellow programmes staff and, also, because they tended not to have to work closely with wing-based colleagues. There were, however, residential members of staff too who alluded to difficult relationships with colleagues and the suspicion that there could be a darker side of prison officer culture. However, I was not able to draw out explicit disclosures on these issues, only furtive and nervous suggestions.

During some of the informal conversations I had with staff I got the impression that there was an element of fear that could surround collegial relationships. If an officer wanted

⁴ 'Nonce' is an acronym for 'Not of Normal Criminal Element' and is widely colloquially (and pejoratively) used in British prisons to refer to people convicted of sexual offences.

to 'fit in' and be protected by his or her colleagues, he or she had to carry out their role in a specific way, even if that went against his or her own conscience. This was perceived by some staff as a high-stakes dilemma because not 'fitting in' was viewed as being potentially dangerous. Good collegial relationships were felt to be crucial because, firstly, the staff generally felt they needed to rely on colleagues if the need for 'back up' arose in a confrontation with prisoners. But, secondly, it was also suggested to me that a member of staff who was viewed as an 'outcast' could be 'set up' and deliberately placed in a dangerous situation wherein prisoners would be given false information about the 'outcast' member of staff who might then experience some form of retaliation from prisoners. Whilst this sort of scenario was not observed or explicitly reported to me during the field work in any of the prisons, it was a fear that some members of staff seemed to feel extremely concerned about.

Quotations like the two that follow only obliquely reference the possibility of a potentially darker side of prison officer collegial relationships, but they do signal the sharp divisions within the staff group that can manifest in ostracism and bullying.

... you know you get trained to do stuff ... but when we get on the wing you have got to conform because you don't want to be seen as an outsider. (Prison Officer)

You are fighting two battles, in a sense, aren't you? The prisoners might not like you, and then if the other officers don't like you, it's isolating. (Prison Officer)

Encountering a desire amongst the staff to conceal aspects of collegial relationships from an outsider does not necessarily mean that they were concealing anything untoward. As Simmel (2005) noted, secrecy in and of itself is not inherently good or bad. For example, George (1993: 236) has argued that insiders might want to maintain secrecy from an outsider ethnographer in order to 'protect their sense of being and their control of meaning'. However, the clear existence of small groups of staff 'cliques' and the evident fear and concern of some staff about being labelled an 'outsider' seemed to suggest that prison officer work could be deliberately and actively made more difficult if you were deemed to be an 'outcast' by your colleagues. Moreover, the presence of some apparently very tight and closed staff groups, coupled with some troubling disclosures from prisoners, seemed to suggest that some of the secret keeping I encountered were due to the concealment of 'dark secrets' and crucial facts.

Getting inside insider secrets

Prison work can be a high-stakes enterprise in prisons of every security category. However, in maximum-security prisons in England, a 30-year history of riot, disorder and staff–prisoner conflict had left a seemingly indelible mark on the institutional memories and on the discipline staff groups in each of these prisons, albeit in uneven ways and through differing means (Drake, 2006; 2009; 2012). The strength and perceived threat of the recurrence of these histories continued to shape staff cultural practices in myriad ways. As suggested above (and see Drake, 2011; 2012), the strength of the ‘security regime’ in high-security prisons is difficult to subvert because the ideology of security permeates, influences and regulates practitioner discretion in ways that are self-reinforcing. However, despite the pervasiveness of ‘security’ and its seemingly ubiquitous influence over the thoughts and actions of prison staff, the suggestion of underground practices amongst prison officers indicated that the ‘security regime’ may not reach into the deepest corners of prison officer culture.

In more than one of the five maximum-security prisons in which I carried out research I was told troubling stories by prisoners about staff impropriety. These stories ranged from exploitation of the vulnerabilities of prisoners to outright brutality against them to descriptions of financial corruption (e.g. trafficking drugs in prison or extorting goods and services on the outside from prisoners’ friends or families). Fully verifying the authenticity of these stories for the purposes of officially reporting them was not possible. However, over the course of the two projects, there were unexpected instances when I became privy to ‘insider knowledges’ either by being in the right place at the right time to overhear a partial conversation or via a few members of staff who were willing to corroborate some of the stories that prisoners had told me. In any event, a second-hand story corroborated by another second-hand source remains an unverified rumour. Accounts of impropriety that are unverifiable are not unique amongst academic work on closed institutions or criminal justice professionals such as the police (see, for example, Norris, 1993; Carlton, 2007), and they present particular dilemmas for the researcher, especially in relation to both the responsibility of privileged access and maintaining academic rigour. Whilst I therefore do not deem it appropriate to describe the unverified allegations that were made during my research, it is of interest to at least examine them in categorical form.

The alleged deviant practices of the staff were suggested by prisoners to range along a scale of transgressive practices. These activities were reported to be carried out by small

groups of staff – operating at extreme ends or the fringes of the ‘security regime’. Allegedly, these were officers who would engage in *sub rosa* activities that might be categorised as various forms of corruption. For example, financial gain or acquisitive corruption, ‘punishment’ of prisoners or brutal corruption or, more curiously, care for prisoners or what might be called palliative ‘corruption’.

This final category of alleged underground staff activity – which I have dubbed palliative ‘corruption’ – is of a different order and character to the other two and requires separate consideration. In some respects, it might provide potential evidence of the authenticity of the other deviant practices, because, as an inversion of harmful corruption, it speaks to the capacity for normative brutality and callousness within maximum-security prison staff culture. That is, if ‘care’ for prisoners – as manifest in acts of human kindness or tactile comforting (e.g. an arm around a shoulder or a comfort-giving hug) – could be viewed within staff and prisoner cultures as a form of corrupt practice, then it makes the possibility of normative brutality against prisoners more plausible. Palliative ‘corruption’ was a secret practice that was relatively more easily uncovered during the research, but it was still difficult to view or discuss. Additionally, it may also have (in certain circumstances) slipped into actually prohibited activities when clandestine relationships were formed between a member of staff and a prisoner and, thus, it could shift from a rather benign (and benevolent) secret to a secret that concealed a strictly prohibited action.

Against the historical-contextual background of long-term maximum-security prisons, the hegemonic masculinity inherent in the prison environment, as discussed by Sim (2008), could result in extreme and perverse permutations of cultural practices. The concept of practical norms, as discussed and deployed by de Sardan (2008) in his examination of African public services, provides helpful insights in understanding corrupt or informal practices (thanks to Tomas Max Martin for bringing this concept to my attention; see Chapter 22 of this volume). De Sardan’s work considers the problem of everyday corruption and examines it as a social activity that is regulated by tacit, informal rules or norms that differ from official or legal rules. Practical norms, in de Sardan’s terms, include practices that do not follow official, formal policies but which are nevertheless regulated by tacitly agreed schemas. During the period in which I carried out my ethnographic work in maximum-security prisons, and as suggested in the earlier sections of this chapter, there were two cultural dimensions which I would argue were pivotal factors in determining and shaping the

tacit understandings the staff had about performing the role of prison officer. Of particular significance during the research were, firstly, a distrust and suspicion of members of staff who attempted to 'care' for prisoners or those who delivered offending behaviour programmes (as discussed above). Secondly, due to the fact that maximum-security prisons hold 'some of the most difficult and dangerous prisoners in the country' (HMCIP, 2002: 9), the delivery of 'punishment' was seen to be a key part of the prison officer's role by some officers. Whilst these two manifestations of prison staff culture are commonly reported in prisons across the UK and elsewhere, the high-stakes nature of the high-security prison environment meant that the 'suspicion of care for prisoners' and the 'need to deliver punishment' could be, arguably, more easily activated within cultural subgroups of these prisons to serve nefarious intentions. That is, the boundaries of informal practical norms could, arguably, be more easily pushed to extreme limits, given the harsh status quo of the maximum-security prison environment.

Sim (2004; 2008) has noted that violence perpetrated by the state in the exercise of criminal justice is a neglected field. He argues that where it is discussed within criminology, it is considered 'the result of an individual, unmanageable state servant deviating from cultural and institutional norms that are otherwise benevolent and supportive' (2004: 115). Likewise, the same arguments are often presented by state officials when specific questions of corruption arise. Despite the limited capacity I had as an ethnographer to fully reveal the 'dark secrets' of prison officer cultural practices in high-security prisons, the partial view that I was able to obtain suggested that corrupt or informal practices were not committed by lone, renegade state servants but by small clusters of tight-knit groups of staff. Moreover, these practices seemed to be supported, organised and 'regulated' (to some extent) by staff cultures that had been shaped by a convergence of traumatic institutional memories and the infiltration of 'security thinking'. Whilst engaging in any of the forms of alleged corruption, mentioned above, staff had to have operated outside the majority of colleagues. It is evident that more research is needed in this area, but gaining access to hidden practices of this particular nature is a tricky business.

Crucially, if the threads of observation and narrative accounts that I drew together on brutal and acquisitive corrupt practices are accurate, then it was not so much that staff were significantly deviating from cultural or formal institutional norms, it was more that they were performing extreme versions of them. That is, within the cold, brutal, masculinised,

punishing and repressive environment of maximum-security prisons, allegations made by prisoners of brutality and of exploitative acquisitive corruption (particularly) could plausibly be viewed as small subgroups of staff simply taking a commonplace series of punishing and painful practices to their logical and ruthless conclusion. It was, in fact, more difficult to imagine the conditions under which the allegations of surreptitious care were taking place, as these activities were more of a deviation from accepted and official practical norms.

Concluding summary

When researching in prisons for long periods of time, it is often the case that a researcher will hear second-hand (and some first-hand) accounts of underground activities carried out by either prisoners or staff. For the ethnographer who hears these stories, it is not always necessary to determine their validity. If the stories hold meaning amongst the staff or prisoner groups, their authenticity may be inconsequential because what matters is their influence over the cultural landscape from the perspectives of those who repeat and believe in the stories. Moreover, if unverified 'horror' stories (which may, in actuality, be myths) about certain prisons can hold weight and purchase within the prisoner society, this can also be equally true amongst the staff group, who may operate as if the stories are authentic. The power of such stories can infuse the ethereal environment of a prison with an ominous vapour that is absorbed by both staff and prisoners alike and which manifests in various ways as both groups interact with one another.

Whether verifiable or not, stories of staff corruption permeated some of the staff and prisoner cultures in the high-security prisons I studied in tangible ways. Becoming aware of stories of corruption either through explicit disclosure by prisoners or through sliver views and informal corroborations during the ethnographic encounter led to my own further analytical reflection, filtering and meaning-making. In particular, when stories of alleged prison officer corruption were analysed together with the observed conditionality of prison officer collegial relationships, they brought into fuller view concealed strands of a matrix of cultural practice. The role of prison officer appeared to be heavily impacted by the power of collegial conditionality. Formal and informal secret keeping as well as the shadows cast over prison practice by the possibility of hidden secrets seemed to converge in sets of beliefs held by some staff that there were real dangers associated with being relegated to an 'out'-group. By examining the conditionality of prison officer culture, the potential ways in which

extreme versions of institutional norms could break off into deviant and corrupt subcultural forms were brought into fuller view. As a result, it became possible to better understand the processes by which staff and organisational cultures might not only stimulate but also effectively demand or require mass indifference, negligence or outright brutality.

The ethnographic lens, however partial and limited, offers the potential to glimpse at a field of vision that may be impossible to obtain in any other way. However, as this chapter illustrates, there are some aspects of the field that may remain frustratingly out of reach and concealed in the shadows. This chapter opened with a brief discussion on the partial nature of ethnographic work and the difficulty of verifying the basic facts of a narrative uncovered in the field when, for example, an informant discloses or hints at a carefully guarded secret. Not gaining full access to all of the secrets hidden within an organisation during the course of an ethnographic study is not an incomplete ethnography. Leaving some quadrants of the ethnographic field undisturbed is not a sign of failure. Discovering practices of secret keeping during ethnographic work can still be meaningfully analysed and understood by an ethnographer without actually gaining full disclosure of the secrets being kept. As Grey (2014) and Costa and Grey (2014) argue, often the secret itself is entirely irrelevant, it is the practice of secret keeping that holds the most stakes and meaning for organisational members. However, under other circumstances, both the secret keeping and the secret being kept are of crucial significance to understanding certain cultural practices and the potential importance of exposing them.

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