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Journal Item

How to cite:

Earle, Rod (2013). What do ethnographers do in prison? *Criminal Justice Matters*, 91(1) pp. 18–19.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/09627251.2013.778749>

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What do ethnographers do in prison?

Rod Earle reports on three papers from the symposiums opening panel.

Reflexivity, trialities and error in prison ethnography

Coretta Phillips and Rod Earle's study of ethnicity, identity and social relations in men's prisons sheds new light on what Phillips (2012) refers to as 'the multicultural prison'. Spending two years considering questions of ethnicity and identity they found themselves unable to avoid their own. Developing a consciousness of one's self in the process of research is known as 'reflexivity'. It has become a widespread term in social science, qualifying its claim to objective knowledge because of the way the personal qualities of the researcher filter and shape the data collected and thus the knowledge that emerges from it. Unfortunately, it tends to make academics even more difficult to understand because they become even more self-obsessed than usual, and, really, no-one cares who they are or the troubles they've seen. Reflexivity, it is argued, is a hall of mirrors best passed through quickly. After all, as Dick Hobbs (1993:62) rather wearily observes, who wants to know about the valiant ethnographer 'who was nearly arrested, almost beaten up and didn't quite go crazy' as they bravely descended into the 'criminal underworld' he himself was brought up in. Reflexivity simply turns the voyeurism of the researcher back on themselves, a narcissistic self-indulgence that confuses the object of study with the method.

Phillips and Earle were, however, very quickly confronted with the sense that their ethnicity, gender and social class, those persistent trialities of social science, were going to play a part in the research. Take, for example, the first day on the wings in HMYOI Rochester, a prison for young men in Kent. We decided we'd both go and explain what our research was about to the young men during their association period in the early evening. Afterwards we returned to our office and compared notes. Coretta's account was very different from mine. While I had struggled to get any attention or generate much interest in our research, Coretta had struggled to field a torrent of stories about prison officers and their racism. Perhaps the novelty of the appearance on the wing of a black, mixed race woman had something to do with it. Nearly all prison officers are white, most are male (in men's prisons). Pretty much the same goes for academics. Some months later Coretta asked if I'd noticed how the prison officers always seemed to address me first when we encountered them on our walks around the prison. Was it my accent, a bit more Surrey than South London? Was it my age (50, since you ask), my gender, my ethnicity, or my winning smile? (NB. There are some inaccuracies in this report). As we progressed through the research we came to appreciate the complexities of our identities and their various impacts on the data we collected (Phillips and Earle 2010). We also discovered how other ethnographers, like Mitch Duneier (2004:101), have come across similar issues. Duneier is convinced that 'neither blacks nor whites...talk honestly about race in the other's presence'.

The first words of the first chapter of Phillips (2012) account of this research project are 'Enduring Trialities'. Reflexivity means appreciating the distance between the privilege of 'ignoring' and burdens of 'enduring' them.

Pictures and punctums, photography and ethnography

Abigail Rowe has researched in two English women's prisons and at the symposium she explored her experiences of connection and disconnection in the research process. Abigail's presentation exemplified the remarks of Lorna Rhodes about a relationship between photography and ethnography. Both disciplines raise -issues about questions of representation, of truth and reality. Photography exists in relation to the arts much as ethnography does to the social sciences. Photography's privileged status, in terms of authenticity of representation, is captured in the folk wisdom that 'a camera never lies' or that 'one photograph is worth a thousand words'.

The authenticity of the photograph derives from the method of exposing film in the camera to the light outside, capturing an image 'as it is'. It is an almost direct translation, according to the theorist Roland Barthes, transferring one reality to another. For Barthes photography is the purest of the representational arts, 'a message without a code', as he put it. In a similar fashion, ethnography is taken to provide the richest, most authentic and revealing of representations of people and their social relations, leading Rhodes to suggest, in opening the symposium, that ethnographers could benefit from considering more closely Barthes analysis of photography.

In particular, Rhodes proposed we attend to Barthes' ideas about 'the punctum':

"A photograph's punctum is that accident [of photographic detail] which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me), ...for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole.... and also a cast of the dice" (Barthes,(with some elision) 1981:27).

Unaware of Rhodes' intentions, Abigail's pre-prepared talk was replete with such illuminating and troubling details. Just as the art of photography is no common accident of light on unexposed film, so Abigail's thoughtful comments on her emotional reactions in the research process were thrillingly ethnographic, the result of carefully crafted reflection, all the more brilliant for being so modestly provided. How, asked Abigail, had those fleeting and peculiar occasions when she had been mistaken for a prisoner, and felt disoriented, connected her to the subject of her study, women's identities in prison. Abigail's field notes record an apparently inconsequential episode in the prison's reception area where she is provided with a drink by Margaret, a prison orderly. Abigail is shocked by the shocked reaction of her prison officer respondent, Jo, a woman who had helped her install herself around the prison:

'Jo was facing me, caught sight of my light blue plastic cup and looked absolutely aghast: 'Where d'you get that?!'. I (nonplussed) said that MARGARET had brought it to me. JO – seemingly quite horrified – said that it was a prisoners' cup: 'Don't drink from it'. I said I really didn't mind, but she shook her head, wrinkling her nose, and took it from me back out to the kitchen.'

Abigail had unwittingly broken the rules, upset the order of things. Margaret, the prison orderly, had mistaken her for a prisoner and provided her with a blue 'prisoner's mug' to drink from. With this grain of detail, Abigail and anyone reading her work, is able to see, to feel, something of the undercurrents of prison life – the casual disgust of prisoners that accompanies their care and containment, the formulas of condescension that surround the mundane simplicity of a cup of coffee. A picture exposed, a punctum stumbled across. Ethnography!

No news from nowhere? Ethnography without illusions

Martyn Hammersley brought to the symposium his extensive experience of ethnography in a wide range of fields, though he quickly confessed that when it came to research inside prison, he was an outsider. Noting how the symposium agenda on the first day was focussed on questions of ethnographic method, reflexivity and epistemology, he set out to steady the nerves of researchers anxious they might flounder in the swampy ground of qualitative research. For Hammersley it is important to avoid polarising the discussion around the potential value of ethnography in prison studies into extreme and intrinsically oppositional stances. He reminded everyone how long sociologists had been arguing over the distinction between political activism and social science, and the difficulties of a partisan position. Such a stance is often, falsely, seen as following automatically from Howard Becker's famous question, 'Whose side are we on?'. And it can be reinforced by the accusation that sociologists are 'spies', as in another quote from the heydays of the 1960s:

'Sociologists stand guard in the garrison and report to their masters on the movements of the occupied populace. The more adventurous [...] don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peasants in the "field", returning with books and articles that break the protective secrecy in which a subjugated population wraps itself, and make it more accessible to manipulation and control./ The sociologist [...] is precisely a kind of spy' (Nicolaus 1968).

Hammersley challenged the arguments for partisanship, partly as reflecting an exaggerated sense of the actual and potential political role of the researcher. The work of social science is more modest in scope, more gradual in effect and diverse in intention, and the discomforts of ethical or political dilemmas come with the territory. They cannot be naively wished away or resolved by 'finding the right side to be on'. For Hammersley there is no perfect, ethnographic vision, no 'whole story' and no 'telling it like it is', only a commitment to inquiry. Again, the advice from another key figure from 1960s, Ned Polsky (1969:140), is telling: he suggested that if someone wants to be a 'social worker', or for that matter a 'correction officer' that is 'their privilege', but that they should not do this in the name of social science.

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