PALGRAVE HANDBOOKS

PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF PRISON ETHNOGRAPHY

Edited by Deborah H. Drake,
Rod Earle and Jennifer Sloan

The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography

Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology

This is a unique and innovative series, the first of its kind dedicated entirely to prison scholarship. At a historical point in which the prison population has reached an all-time high, the series seeks to analyse the form, nature and consequences of incarceration and related forms of punishment. *Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology* provides an important forum for burgeoning prison research across the world.

Titles include:

Vincenzo Ruggiero and Mick Ryan
PUNISHMENT IN EUROPE
A Critical Anatomy of Penal Systems

Phil Scraton and Linda Moore
THE INCARCERATION OF WOMEN
Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits

Peter Scharff Smith
WHEN THE INNOCENT ARE PUNISHED
The Children of Imprisoned Parents

Thomas Ugelvik
POWER AND RESISTANCE IN PRISON
Doing Time, Doing Freedom

Marguerite Schinkel
BEING IMPRISONED
Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance

Mark Halsey and Simon Deegan
YOUNG OFFENDERS
Crime, Prison and Struggles for Desistance

Andrew M. Jefferson and Liv S. Gaborit
HUMAN RIGHTS IN PRISONS
Comparing Institutional Encounters in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and the Philippines

Deborah H. Drake, Rod Earle and Jennifer Sloan (*editors*)
THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF PRISON ETHNOGRAPHY

Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology
Series Standing Order ISBN 978–1–137–27090–0 hardback
(*outside North America only*)

The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography

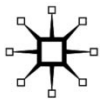
Edited by

Deborah H. Drake
Senior Lecturer in Criminology, The Open University, UK

Rod Earle
Lecturer in Youth Justice, The Open University, UK

Jennifer Sloan
Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

palgrave
macmillan



Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2015 978-1-137-40387-2

First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-68058-0 ISBN 978-1-137-40388-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137403889

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Contents

Figures

Foreword

What has prison ethnography to offer in an age of mass incarceration?

Being invited to write a Foreword to this groundbreaking collection, following the equally impressive symposium on prison ethnography ('Resisting the Eclipse'), hosted by The Open University's International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research (ICCCR) just over a year earlier, is a great honour. But as I sit down to write a few words that will preface this testament to the importance of ethnographic studies of the prison, I have a slight nagging feeling that the mood of optimism and excitement that marked the conference in September 2013 may have diminished slightly. Many of us work in countries that are experiencing an era of highly politicised penal policy and, relatively rapidly, it seems that doing research in prisons has become a great deal more difficult. The necessary reliance on government agencies to authorise access to prisons, the sometimes tortuous process of liaising with gatekeepers and the intimidation that can be applied by organisations that do not like one's methods or findings have all made the ethnographic endeavour trickier than in previous times. From the perspective of someone working in the UK, it is tempting to rail against the current government and, in particular, at a Secretary of State for Justice who has taken the hardening of penal sensibilities to new levels, made swingeing financial cuts to prison budgets (resulting in many prisons operating with a skeleton staff) and back-pedalled on his predecessor's promise of a 'rehabilitation revolution'. In the current climate, many prison governors are understandably reluctant to open their doors to academic researchers. But, equally, these obstacles mean that prison ethnography has never been more necessary.

The impetus behind the symposium that precipitated this volume was Loïc Wacquant's *Ethnography* article 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration'. The presenters at the conference reminded participants that an eclipse is something hidden or overshadowed; not something that is not occurring. But if prison ethnography has been 'eclipsed', what accounts for its relative invisibility and what is overshadowing it? It has been suggested that one reason why prisons research may at times go on under the radar is that much of it is conducted by doctoral students, who are able to take advantage of the relative freedoms of the PhD, but often unable to generate the kind of attention that their work deserves (Crewe and Jewkes, 2012). This is changing (and in evidence I would point to the embryonic series that this volume is part of, *Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology*, which welcomes proposals from newly qualified PhD candidates), but the change is happening

quite slowly, particularly for ethnographers writing in languages other than English.

There can be little doubt that in many countries ethnographic studies are overshadowed by a heavily quantitative approach to penology. But the bald statistics can blind us to the realities beneath. Organisation theorists have used the notion of 'dazzle' in relation to highly ornate and embellished buildings, arguing that excessive decoration can induce a kind of architectural and aesthetic apathy. In other words, their sheer brilliance induces a seemingly paradoxical anaesthetising effect, dulling or deadening the senses of those who occupy them or gaze upon them (Dale and Burrell, 2003). The idea of dazzle as deception actually comes not from architecture but from the 'camouflage' effect with which some battleships were painted in the two world wars. Dazzle painting (or 'razzle dazzle'), consisting of brightly coloured geometric shapes or bold black-and-white stripes, might seem an unlikely form of camouflage – one would imagine that a vividly painted, moving monument to cubist art, ploughing through the waves, might draw attention to itself. However, the technique was developed not to conceal the ship, but to disrupt the visual rangefinders used for naval artillery and make it difficult for the enemy to estimate the vessel's type, size, speed and heading. The dazzle eclipsed the target.

Prison statistics can similarly 'dazzle' and run risk of blinding or anaesthetising the observer. In an age of mass incarceration, it is not particularly surprising that the focus tends to be on the big numbers – of prisoners incarcerated, levels of mental illness and drug dependency, rates of suicide and self-harm, children left without a parent, recidivism, individuals dependent on the prison–industrial complex for their livelihood and so on. California, the US's largest state prison system, serves as an example. Since 2009 when its prisons housed more than 160,000 prisoners and employed over 69,000 personnel at an annual cost of $10.3 billion, California has been an enthusiastic adopter of Life Without Parole (LWOP), with well over half the life sentences imposed being LWOP (Dolovich, 2011). These almost incomprehensible numbers have placed the state's prison system under such severe strain that it has twice been subject to court orders requiring it to cut its prison population by tens of thousands. But between 2003 and 2008, 5,471 prisoners out of a total of 12,933 life sentences imposed received life with the *possibility* of parole, a statistic which might seem to cut against the notion of a widespread commitment to permanent penal exclusion. However, as Dolovich reminds us, the possibility of parole makes little practical difference; in most cases, it is a meaningless ritual in which the form is preserved but in practice is rarely enacted.

Ethnography can help us to understand such bureaucratic processes and the visceral effects they have on the flesh-and-blood people serving these horrendous sentences. Even allowing for the fact that life-sentenced prisoners might legitimately be regarded as dangerous beyond their recommended sentence,

one might still expect parole boards to see an appreciable number of people, especially by the third or fourth time around, who could be released with minimal public safety risk. And yet, for the past decade, the Californian Parole Board has denied 98 per cent of the petitions it hears. From this, one might conclude that lifers in California are especially dangerous (which common sense would suggest is ridiculous), but we can't possibly hope to understand what is happening without engaging with the people at both ends of the decision-making process.

Engagement is also crucial because penal history can be painted in very broad brushstrokes, and it befalls ethnographers to find detail, texture and nuance within the big picture. (And can there be any more detailed, textured and nuanced evocation of prison life than the gendered power dynamics that imbue the making of a cup of coffee or the 'perfume of sweat', as described by two of the contributors to this book?) Of course, ethnographers are not the only people who can take on the task of revealing the prison. Critical criminologists have been amongst the most vociferous and passionate critics of prisons and have consistently challenged what they see as an increasingly punitive criminal justice agenda. But occupying the intellectual space between theory and politics, critical criminology sometimes appears curiously detached from the people most affected by the structural and systemic imbalances they are concerned with. Some of the most scathing critiques of prisons are written by individuals who appear never to have set foot inside a prison, or at least not for some decades. In some ways, this is understandable. Prison research is difficult, stressful and time-consuming, and many scholars leave the field early in their careers (often following completion of their PhD), never to return.

But critical perspectives have, to a large extent, shaped penology. They have done much to highlight atrocities, instigate reform and promote an abolitionist agenda, which sometimes precludes their authors from saying anything that is positive or progressive within penal systems: for example, about successful individual prison communities, about pioneering penal 'experiments' or about enlightened governors trying to change the system from within (all of which are represented within these pages). It is as if to illuminate pockets of good practice or individual agency, however small, would undermine their overarching message. Yes, prisons are, as Scott and Codd (2013: 170) remind us, 'places of sadness and terror, harm and injustice, secrecy and oppression'. But they can also be places of great humour and playfulness, friendship and camaraderie, educational enlightenment, successful therapeutic intervention and transformative achievement. All these emotional states and more are reflected in this volume. We may at times 'walk through graves', but we also witness the 'creation of miracles' when we infiltrate the prison.

This may be one of the reasons why, in comparison to many other fields of scholarly interest, prisons generate a high degree of curiosity, sometimes

motivated by personal experience (not necessarily of confinement, but perhaps of perceived injustice or the power of the human spirit to survive in adversity). Criminology has largely resisted the notion that prisons are highly charged emotional environments and that qualitative inquiry has autoethnographic dimensions. Not in this book, though. Here we experience the prison from multiple perspectives – not just from particular demographic/status positions including gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality and sexual orientation – but from other standpoints: the prisoner, the ex-prisoner, the prison governor, the clinical psychologist, the policy advisor, the prison chaplain, the activist and many more besides. The stories they tell, or that are told on their behalf, remind us of the illuminating power of narrative.

One of the exciting things about *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography*, then, is that, in myriad ways, it reveals why we do ethnographic research, what our conscious or unconscious motivations might be, how we feel about our research and our research participants and what the intended and unexpected outcomes of our ethnographic endeavours may be. The contributors tell their stories from the field without fear of exposure as human beings capable of compassion, empathy, excitement – and the rather more ambivalent or negative feelings, as described by some of the authors here. Far from producing 'soft' research, they succeed in retaining epistemological and theoretical rigour, whilst at the same time being highly reflexive about the research they are engaged in. Such interesting and honest accounts provide a benchmark for others trying to process their experiences about the ethnographic fieldwork they undertake and about the pains and gains of doing qualitative prison research (see Jewkes, 2012; Beyens et al., 2013; Jewkes and Wright, 2015; and the 2014 special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* on 'Doing Prison Research Differently' for more detailed discussions).

In an era of mass incarceration, reflexive, human-centric ethnography is an important counter, not just to quantitative analysis, but to the 'official' audit culture that has led to prisons being judged on a plethora of government-instigated rules, directives and performance targets that render individual prisoners anonymous administrative targets. Recent decades have also witnessed the dominance of the empiricist, 'scientific' methods and findings of psychologists. The emergence of clinical programmes aimed at treating offenders' behaviour has resulted in prison psychologists being awarded an unprecedented level of power, including power over access to prisons by academic researchers. Government departments have further discouraged ethnographers with a variety of strategies questioning the methodology, objectivity and usefulness of sociologically imaginative studies of the internal life of prison. If this were not potentially obstructive enough, the prison administrators' demands for researchers to disclose information concerning inmate behaviour that breaks prison rules and can be adjudicated against, including illegal acts,

and behaviour that is potentially harmful to the research participant, conflict with most university ethics committees' requirement that the researcher guarantees participant confidentiality. The demand that researchers within prisons will be expected to 'submit any questionnaires or interview schedules in advance for clearance' further obstructs ethnographers whose aims are to see what questions emerge whilst in the field. These obstacles to qualitative prison research are not insurmountable, but they are certainly challenging and, therefore, must be resisted if prisons and prisoners are not to be consigned to the deepest recess of knowledge and understanding.

Ethnographic research in custodial settings is, then, a challenging but rewarding endeavour. There may have been an 'eclipse' of prison ethnography, but this collection robustly counters any notion that we have witnessed its demise. Deborah Drake, Rod Earle and Jennifer Sloan – themselves all highly experienced prison ethnographers – have brought together an impressive collection of researchers from numerous countries doing important, insightful ethnographies across many diverse prison systems. Over a decade ago, John Pratt (2002) claimed that punishment had become anonymous, bureaucratic, rationalised and remote, returning us to a dark age of monstrous incivility and reducing individual lives to bureaucratic targets. The chapters that follow demonstrate that, despite the enormous challenges we face in our attempts to let a little light in on these dark ages of imprisonment, we are succeeding in deepening our understandings of the prison, in holding prison authorities to account and in giving voice to the individuals who, rich in experience and potential, are impoverished by the circumstances of their confinement. Prison ethnography seen through the lenses of performance, policy, participation, politics, power dynamics and personal biography are all represented in the pages of this book. *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography* is a testament to the vibrancy, diversity and global reach of the field and suggests that, despite the pessimism with which I began, and the challenges to our work that are described throughout this collection, ethnography is succeeding in illuminating the shadows of the prison. We are making a difference. I hope that this book inspires many future researchers to do likewise.

Yvonne Jewkes
Professor of Criminology,
University of Leicester, UK

References

Beyens, K., Christiaens, J., Claes, B., De Ridder, S., Tournel, H. and Tubex, H. (eds) (2013) *The Pains of Criminological Research* (Brussels, Belgium: VUB Press).

Crewe, B. and Jewkes, Y. (2012) 'Introduction', *Punishment & Society* (Special Issue on 'The Pains of Imprisonment Revisited'), 13, 5, 507–8.
Dale, K. and Burrell, G. (2003) 'An-aesthetics and Architecture', in A. Carr and P. Hancock (eds) *Art and Aesthetics at Work* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
Dolovich, S. (2011) 'Creating the Permanent Prisoner', in C. Ogletree and A. Sarat (eds) *Life Without Parole: America's New Death Penalty* (New York: NYU Press).
Jewkes, Y. (2012) 'Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources: Doing Prison Research Differently', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18, 1, 63–75.
Jewkes, Y. and Wright, S. (in press) 'Researching the Prison', in Y. Jewkes, B. Crewe and J. Bennett (eds) *Handbook on Prisons*, Second edition (London: Routledge).
Jewkes, Y. (2014) 'Doing Prison Research Differently', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20, 4, 387–488.
Scott, D. and Codd, H. (2012) *Controversial Issues in Prisons* (Maidenhead: Open University Press).
Wacquant, L. (2002) 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration', *Ethnography*, 3, 4, 371–97.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, the editors would like to thank the contributors to this Handbook. Despite the breadth of this volume and the number of authors involved, we miraculously managed to hand the finished manuscript over to the publisher on time, which is often unheard of for a collection of this size. This is, in large measure, due to the professionalism, diligence and careful attention of our authors. It was a delight and a pleasure to work with you all.

The editors would also like to formally acknowledge the considerable intellectual contributions of our friends at the Global Prisons Research Network, especially Andrew Jefferson, Tomas Max Martin and Mahuya Bandyopadhyay. It was during a conversation amongst Andrew, Tomas, Mahuya, Deb Drake, Jen Sloan and Ben Crewe at the British Society of Criminology conference in Leicester in 2010 that the seed of an idea to hold an international prison ethnography symposium was hatched. It was subsequently agreed that the event would be hosted by the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research (ICCCR) at The Open University in Milton Keynes, UK, and Rod Earle came aboard as another co-organiser. It is thus with thanks also to the ICCCR for their generous support and to Sarah Batt, specifically, for adding such professionalism and seemingly seamless organisation to the event. Many of those who attended that symposium are also present in this volume, but we wish to acknowledge those who, for one reason or another, were unable to contribute to it. Chris Garces and Sacha Darke – your contributions are sorely missed. If there is a second edition, you're both first on our list to cajole.

We also wish to extend our most heartfelt appreciation to Jules Willan, Harriet Barker and Dominic Walker at Palgrave Macmillan. Jules and Harriet – thanks for believing in the project at the outset, and Dom – thanks for seeing it through. We are also grateful to the *Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology* series editors, Ben Crewe, Yvonne Jewkes and Thomas Ugelvik, for lending their support to the collection (although, how could they not!).

We wish to extend our personal thanks to our loved ones who, invariably, helped to support and see each of us through this project (as well as our other respective projects, workloads and crazed ramblings on various prison-related issues of angst). So, from Deb – thanks, as ever, to my colleagues in the Department of Social Policy and Criminology at The Open University for their care, inspiration and support, particularly Steve Tombs, Louise Westmarland, Gerry Mooney and Ross Fergusson who provided seemingly endless advice, assistance and good humour. Thanks also, of course, to my co-editors Jen and Rod. You were both a pleasure to work with and although I am pleased that the project

is complete, I will miss working on this with you. Finally, I want to thank my friends Tara Hackl, Joel Harvey and Daniel Wakelin for their steadfast support and my partner, Andrew Lindfield – for everything.

From Rod – thanks to all those who attended the *Resisting the Eclipse* symposium and got this ball rolling, particularly Deb and Jen for seeing it through. I couldn't hope to work with nicer people. Yvonne Jewkes was a supportive presence throughout, who both inspired and guided. I am grateful to colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care at The Open University who continue to provide, and believe in, a sense of scholarly community in very trying times.

From Jen – there are so many people to thank for their support in this endeavour, not least those that I have worked directly with, including contributors, co-authors (Serena, you're fab!), publishers and, perhaps most importantly, my co-editors. Deb and Rod, you both have been wonderful in guiding a novice through the process and in giving me the confidence to take on such a role. Thank you for letting me be a part of this wonderful process. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Sheffield and at Sheffield Hallam University who have seen me through the editorial process and put up with the worrier-that-is-Jenny! Finally, I thank my family for always being there – Mum, Dad, James, Oscar and Migsy. Without you, I don't know where I would be.

Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to all those prisoners, prison staff and managers who have granted us the privilege of spending time with them and sharing their stories.

Contributors

Helen Arnold is Lecturer in Criminology in the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Social Work at the University Campus Suffolk, UK.

Lilian Ayete-Nyampong is Head of Research, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, Ghana.

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay is an Associate Professor in the School of Development Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India.

Jamie Bennett is Governor of HMP Grendon/Springhill and holds a PhD in Criminology, University of Edinburgh, UK.

Kristel Beyens is Professor of Penology and Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium.

Miranda Boone is Professor of Penitentiary Law and Penology at the University of Groningen and Senior Lecturer in Criminal Law and Criminology at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Lucy Carr is a PhD student in the Department of Law, University of Sheffield, UK.

Gilles Chantraine is a researcher and sociologist at the CNRS – CLERSÉ, France.

Ben Crewe is Deputy Director of Prisons Research Centre and Director of M.St. Penology Programme at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, UK.

William Davies is Senior Lecturer in Criminology in the School of Criminology Subject Group at Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Deborah H. Drake is Senior Lecturer in Criminology in the Department of Social Policy and Criminology at The Open University, UK.

Rod Earle is Lecturer in Youth Justice in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University, UK.

Elisabeth Fransson is an Associate Professor at the Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy, Norway.

Martyn Hammersley is Professor of Educational and Social Research at the Department of Childhood, Youth and Sport at The Open University, UK.

Joel Harvey is Lecturer in Clinical Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, UK.

Alice Ievins is a PhD student at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, UK.

Andrew M. Jefferson is Senior Researcher at DIGNITY: Danish Institute Against Torture, Denmark.

Yvonne Jewkes is Professor of Criminology at the Department of Criminology, University of Leicester, UK.

Berit Johnsen is Associate Professor at the Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy.

Alison Liebling is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice and the Director of the Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, UK.

Tomas Max Martin is Senior Advisor at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, Denmark.

Benita Moolman is a research specialist in the Human and Social Development Unit in Cape Town, South Africa.

Coretta Phillips is an Associate Professor at the Mannheim Centre for the Study of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, UK.

Laura Piacentini is Professor of Criminology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Strathclyde, UK.

Lorna A. Rhodes is Emeritus Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, USA.

Abigail Rowe is Lecturer in Criminology in the Department of Social Policy and Criminology at The Open University, UK.

Nicolas Sallée is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, Université de Montréal, Canada.

David Scott is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

Jennifer Sloan is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the Department of Law and Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University, UK.

Christina Straub is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law, University of Leeds, UK.

Thomas Ugelvik is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Political Science and Community Planning, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Norway.

James B. Waldram is a medical anthropologist and Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

Lindsay Whetter is a PhD student in the College of Life and Environmental Science at the University of Exeter, UK.

Serena Wright is a research assistant at the Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, UK.

General Introduction: What Ethnography Tells Us about Prisons and What Prisons Tell Us about Ethnography

Deborah H. Drake, Rod Earle and Jennifer Sloan

The practice of ethnography as a research method has a long history that places special importance on understanding the perspectives of the people under study and of observing their activities in everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). It is a method used by researchers in a variety of disciplines, but it is perhaps most famously associated with social anthropology and the study of indigenous cultures (Malinowski, 1922; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Turnbull, 1961). Ethnographers aim to produce rich and detailed accounts of people and the social processes they are embedded in. For these reasons, it is often employed by educational, health and social sciences researchers in a wide variety of institutional, community and other social settings.

This Handbook draws together a collection of papers that examine ethnography or ethnographic research practices undertaken inside prisons. In 2002, Professor Loïc Wacquant published 'The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration' in a special issue of the journal *Ethnography.* In that article, Wacquant expressed a visceral horror at what he encountered on entering a large US penal institution and his deep sense of foreboding about what such places mean. With US prison populations booming, he lamented the scarcity of ethnographic studies of American jails and prisons. He was troubled to note that, at a time when the detailed and sensitive examinations of prisons which ethnographic work can provide are most urgently needed, this kind of research seemed to be disappearing under the weight of more conventional and profitable 'correctional' research.

Some ten years later, in 2012, a group of prison researchers in the UK and Europe organised a symposium on prison ethnography. Supported by the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research at The Open University and in collaboration with colleagues from the Global Prisons Research Network (GPRN), the symposium aimed to contrast the relative dearth of prison ethnography in the US with another story – one of a vibrant, critical and engaged body of prison research around the world. The symposium attracted

over 100 delegates from 12 different countries, most with wide experience of long-term, in-depth research in prisons, and created a unique opportunity to share perspectives and dilemmas from the field. Those who came together at this event examined the many different challenges ethnographic researchers face in getting close to the experiences, feelings and understandings of prison life in North America, Africa, South America, India, the UK and other European countries. This collection not only presents versions of most of the papers that were discussed at the symposium, but it also draws in contributions from other prison researchers who were not present at the event but whose work informs the growing body of expertise on ethnographic methods, on prisons and on the research dilemmas associated with ethnographic work in a prison context.

In this introductory chapter, we present a consolidated overview of both what ethnography has given us in relation to our understandings of the prison and, in turn, what prison ethnographies have contributed to our understanding of the ethnographic enterprise. This Handbook offers contributions to existing literature on both of these fronts as well as an in-depth and critical examination of the continued and increasing use of imprisonment around the world.

Seeing with words: Prison through the lens of ethnography

Prison ethnography has some very distinctive difficulties as an approach to researching prison life. These difficulties become acute where the principal focus of interest is the lives of prisoners rather than the prison institution as a whole. Some might argue that in relation to prisoners' lives, ethnography is not 'real' ethnography, in the strict anthropological meaning of the process, where

> conclusions are based primarily on 'fieldwork', which involves entering the world of the people under study as a close observer or even as a participant over an extended period of time. By sharing in the daily life experiences of his or her subjects, the ethnographer becomes more attuned to the less visible conditions and situations that shape these lives.
>
> (Duneier et al., 2014: 2)

The majority of prison ethnographies which focus on prisoner cultures or 'societies' – including the majority within this Handbook – are done by people unlikely ever to be imprisoned, and who have never been sent to prison themselves, other than as a visiting researcher. Most of the authors in this collection are thus 'outsiders' who have not practically shared in the experiences of the core characters in the object of study – prisoners. They have not been deprived of their liberty and, in most cases, the researcher inevitably goes home and leaves the prison behind at the end of their working day. At very least, the

outsider researcher always retains that option, thereby losing touch with the defining reality of the prisoners' experience – constraint on freedom and being locked up and under control. Immersion, in the traditional, direct ethnographic sense, is bound to be relatively shallow, particularly for those ethnographies that have aimed solely to focus on the prisoner society. That said, the tradition of prison ethnography reflected in this collection aims to capture a far wider range of perspectives than just that of the prisoner. Prison*er* ethnographies differ from prison *staff* ethnographies as well as from *prison-as-organisation* ethnographies.

By focusing on the nitty-gritty of the research method and the experiences of ethnographers in different prison contexts, this collection aims to draw out the nuanced differences between ethnographic techniques, approaches and practices. Moreover, as Hammersley points out in Chapter 1, negotiating the oscillations between the positions of an outsider and an insider (whether in a prison setting or amongst Melanesian Islanders) is part of the terrain the ethnographer must traverse, but it is central to the intrinsically complex journey. As Young points out, '[T]here is no singular insider or outsider position that researchers occupy during the course of fieldwork, but rather myriad positions and statuses that can be viewed by respondents either as insider or outsider depending on the social circumstances or conditions affecting the research endeavour' (Young, 2004: 192).

Within this collection, we view prison ethnography as an approach to conducting research in prisons. We define ethnography as a form of in-depth study that includes the systematic and impressionistic recording of human cultural and social life in situ. It includes observing and/or interacting with people as they go about their everyday lives, routines and practices. We contrast an ethnographic approach with purely interview-based research methodologies that tend to be episodic, short-lived and often take place outside of spaces the informant routinely occupies. In addition, we also recognise an ethnographic approach in commitments to the generation of 'thick' descriptive accounts of the research, though these may vary considerably in 'thickness', depth and texture.

Wolcott notes that the term 'ethnography' refers to both the process and the product – 'the presentation itself' (1990: 47) – and we embrace the interrelational continuity of this process. An ethnography does not emerge as a singular, fully formed product, but rather manifests in a variety of forms over the lifetime of the research. We welcome that this form of study is not an *-ology* but a *-graphy*,[1] tending towards the arts of depiction rather than the science of discovery. As Fassin (2014) remarks, there is much that connects the craft of ethnography with the world of literature, and the ethnographer with the novelist. The celebrated French novelist Marcel Proust's argument about 'not going too fast' and making time for detail can serve the ethnographer well.

Back (2007, 2012, 2013) contrasts the attentive, patient approach of ethnography with recent trends towards a journalistically informed, web-enabled, 'reality rush' of proliferating forms of social representation. Amid the torrents of journalistic exposé and reality TV, Back is concerned not only with voyeuristic intrusion into the lives of the poor and the marginalised, the vicarious glee with which those 'unfortunates' 'living at the bottom' are paraded across screens, but also with the claims of revelation, relevance and detail. It is as if the simple profusion of documentary data implies a genuine empirical provenance. Coinciding with this trend, there is, according to Back, a counter-movement – a second eclipse we might add – within academic sociology towards abstraction and theory, a disengagement in the face of such a volume of competing representations of the meaning of lives lived 'out there'. Tellingly, he notes a reticence or inhibition in some emerging sociological literature, such as PhD dissertations, to attempt 'thick' or 'rich' social description, to decline the invitations for a reflexive, ethnographically informed sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In this collection, Sloan and Wright (see Chapter 7) and Waldram (see Chapter 11) engage directly with such problems, offering, respectively, their own experiences as hope and insight into a new generation of prison ethnographers and the complexities for prison ethnographers of capturing appropriate 'tone'.

Back (2007: 16) is scathing about a trend towards what might be called 'sound-bite' or 'sugar' sociology which confuses quotation for portraiture, sweetness for flavour. It is, he says, 'the task of sociological writing to bring to life the people we work with and listen to'. He quarrels with quotations used as if they were tables or graphs in a quantitative study, as free-standing, self-contained illustrations of some aspect of the text. He cites (2007: 17) the ethnographer Mitch Duneier's pithy remark:

> If you are going to get at the humanity of people, you can't just have a bunch of disembodied thoughts that come out of subject's mouths in interviews without ever developing characters and trying to show people as full human beings. In order to do that it is useful to have a character that lives in the text.

In this collection, one author, Lindsay Whetter (see Chapter 17), resorts to poetry (not her own) to work through and express the depth of feeling and the complexity of emotion she encountered through her work in prison. We welcome the exploration of lyricism as a genuine effort to better understand and to give more life and force to character, feeling and experience in prison texts (see Abbott, 2007; Wakeman, 2014).

Virginia Woolf is celebrated for breaking a prolonged silence in literature around women's lives and desires. Her experiments were not always accessible or accepted, but they almost always opened doors to new ways of knowing

and knowing what was hidden. Similar ambition can only enhance prison ethnography, and Abigail Rowe's contribution (in Chapter 18) indicates some of the ethnographic possibilities of getting behind the 'psychic shields', the carapace-hard exteriors that prison excels in fashioning, and that so fascinated Woolf. Whether it is 'The Mark on the Wall' (Woolf, 1991) or 'a stain upon the silence' (Samuel Beckett quoted in Hillyard et al., 2004), the models and methods of literature should not be neglected by prison ethnographers.

Writing about what has been encountered in prison and making sense of it is one of the most demanding and elusive tasks of the ethnographic researcher (see Drake, Chapter 13, this volume). Taking a lesson from the priorities and methods of anthropology distinguishes prison ethnography from the positivistic predilections of more conventional criminological research in prisons. Ethnography is never about finding causes. It exists to demonstrate that there are so many ways of being human. As Lorna Rhodes demonstrates in Chapter 14, prison ethnography leads away from the dehumanising tendencies of criminology towards the more fully human concerns of an anthropology of prison.

Drawings from the past: Prison classics

The history of prison ethnography in England can trace its origins to the form of reflections committed to paper by prison visitors and reformists such as John Howard (1777) and Elizabeth Fry (1827). Howard toured the prisons and gaols of eighteenth-century England in search of models of good practice in the emerging penal estate. What he found appalled him so much that his lengthy report *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* was published to expose the neglect, brutality and corruption that characterised the prison system. Elizabeth Fry's work consolidated the philanthropic and religious connection between establishing penitentiary prisons and campaigning for their improvement by reform. Her Quaker faith fed her activism, and her short, but influential, book *Observations of the Siting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners* detailed the regimes of various early nineteenth-century prisons, graphically listing their many failings.

After a period of relative quiescence in the US, there was, in the mid-twentieth century, something of a resurgence in qualitative studies of prison life. It coincided with the blooming of American 'New Deal' sociology and the flourishing of what Sumner (1994) characterises as 'The New Disciplinary Matrix', gathering around sociology and psychiatry. Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* (1940) established the modern form. In his in-depth and richly detailed study of a relatively typical American state penitentiary, Clemmer eschewed the attractions of the notorious big city prisons, such as New York's Sing Sing, or the new generation of model prisons, such as Stateville,

being built across the US at that time. He opted to write about where he worked, in Illinois. Clemmer's training as a sociologist as well as a criminologist resulted in him being appointed to the Classification Board and Mental Health Office of the Illinois State Prison System. He used his position to further his interest in prison culture and drew from prisoners' essays and autobiographical writings. He could refer to thousands of 'sympathetic conversations' with inmates gathered over his years of work in the prison, including a period spent as coach of a prison football team. Due to this depth of immersion and a variety of source materials, Clemmer's study is often credited as being the founding text of prison ethnography and consistently referenced for its originality and insight. Clemmer coined the term 'prisonisation' to capture the extent to which prisons generate and then inculcate their own distinctive cultures. As he notes, however distinctive they seem, and indeed are, prisons and the people within them are always part of society: '[I]n a sense, the prison culture reflects the American culture, for it is a culture within it' (1940: 298). He identified an 'inmate code' as a set of rules and sometimes specified rituals that men in prison adopted to establish a contrarian and self-sustaining identity from the prison regime. The idea of the inmate or a convict code has now acquired an almost mythical status, both in penal sociology and in prison vernaculars.

The convict code, prison culture and other aspects of the way prisoners collectively and personally respond to incarceration formed the basis of Gresham Sykes' (1958) now famous study *The Society of Captives*. Sykes, writing in the second wave of Chicago social interactionist sociology, provides another landmark text and indispensable reference point. Sykes paid early tribute to Clemmer's anthropological insights: 'It taught us to see the prison not simply as a grab bag of problems such as discipline, industry, sanitation and so on, but as a culture which could be fruitfully studied in its own right' (1958: 576).

Sykes entered a maximum-security men's prison in the US with the intention of investigating that culture. His account has become a landmark text, acquiring the dubious status of being 'part of the litany of penology' (Rock, 2008). In some senses, this is unfortunate because *The Society of Captives* is often taken to speak to a universal, almost timeless, prison experience. Reading it dispels this illusion quickly. With its vivid descriptions of armed guards and gun towers overseeing prison compounds, it is clearly driven by a sensitivity to totalitarian power that was inevitably sharper in context in which the study was conducted. In the mid-1950s, barely a decade after the defeat of fascism in Europe, the US remained in thrall to its power, the manner of its own victory and the lurking threat of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. 'The prison official is a bureaucrat' declares Sykes boldly in the introduction, 'but he is a bureaucrat with a gun.' Sykes indicates the shadows looming over him: 'the calculated atrocities of the concentration camps' and the 'ruthless exploitation' of the Soviet gulag. This helps to explain his overriding interest in 'total power'

and the possibility that a maximum-security prison will furnish him with a 'prism through which we can see the spectrum of forces at work when social control nears its extreme' (1958: p. xxxiv).

His detailed study was the first to capture and conceptualise the deprivations of prison life. Sykes' 'pains of imprisonment' became a framework through which the distress experienced by prisoners as a result of their confinement could be better understood. The five pains identified by Sykes define the prisoner experience by the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. By identifying the deprivation of what are, fundamentally, essential human needs, Sykes made clear the inherent, intentional and profound inhumanity of the prison experience. Whilst the contribution of Sykes' work is frequently lauded in the prisons literature and continues to be widely cited, the lack of recognition of his work and findings in prison and criminal justice policymaking remains problematic.

Whilst the shadows of totalitarianism have now receded from the foreground, the reverse is true of issues of race and gender that Sykes' perceptive introduction also notes:

> Race relations take on new forms in the custodial institution where the ratio between Negroes and whites frequently approaches unity and both groups live under conditions of enforced equality. In prison, as in war, we find men without women and norms concerning the masculine role and the endurance of sexual frustration take on new guises.
>
> (1958: p. xxxii)

As several chapters in this collection attest to, the structuring and experiential features of race and gender have endured and evolved in scale, urgency and complexity in contemporary prison landscapes. Sykes' study is an invaluable reference point to the potential of ethnography to illuminate them.

After Sykes' contribution, and possibly even more widely known and highly regarded, Erving Goffman provides students of ethnography with another classic, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. *Asylums* is Goffman's account of three years, 1954–57, spent visiting The National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and working amongst the 7,000 inmates of St Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. It begins with his by-now famous definition of a total institution: 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman, 1961: xiii).

Prisons and mental hospitals make a paradigmatic form which is explored in the first essay, 'On the Characteristics of Total Institutions'. Significantly for our purposes here, in stressing the literary ambition of ethnographic writing,

Goffman is quick to deploy in his opening account of 'the inmate world' the words of the Irish poet and playwright, Brendan Behan. Goffman takes from Behan's autobiography, *Borstal Boy*, his description of the 'red and white and pity-coloured flashes' beaten out of him by the borstal wardens whilst inducting him to the institution's violent habits. Goffman's prose swings between the lyrical and the clinical, the historical and the biographical, to great effect. He quotes liberally from case notes and reflects at length on his own experiences in conducting semi-covert participant observation fieldwork in which he posed for nearly a year as an employee of the St Elizabeth's Hospital.

Asylums has been continuously in print since it was first published in 1961 and is widely hailed as a text that humanised, and rendered much more visible, a dehumanised and largely invisible group of people. If not formally a trilogy, these three books – *The Prison Community*, *The Society of Captives* and *Asylums* – established a form and an approach to ethnographic research in prison that has been sustained, albeit with difficulty and not without controversy, to the present day.

In a more contemporary context, Wacquant (2002) gives an excellent overview of the scene in the US, including the contributions of John Irwin's *The Felon* (1970) and James Jacobs' *Stateville* (1977), both of which are highly influential works that fit into the tradition of prison ethnography (along with others such as Toch, 1975, 1977), albeit not specifically identifying themselves as such at the time. As Hammersley argues in Chapter 1, the implied epistemic privilege that accompanies an ethnographic approach automatically, but sometimes spuriously, places certain expectations upon the work. As Wolcott notes, 'faulting a study because of an unwarranted claim to be ethnographic may overshadow the fact that, labelling error aside, the research is thorough, informative, and insightful' (1990: 45). Rather than tangling in arguments over ethnographic credentials and the exact methodological provenance of various prison studies, the approach we have taken, as editors, has been relatively open and eclectic. Whilst some anthropologists may be justified in defending the integrity of the method, our primary interest has been to embrace and reflect the diversity of ethnographic prison research to better challenge and champion its various potentials. Lorna Rhodes' contribution (Chapter 14) is an excellent example of this. Her work derives strongly from the disciplinary traditions of cultural anthropology and thus contributes powerfully to the range and breadth of otherwise more tightly focused prison ethnographies. Some of these adopt narrower and more conventional qualitative methodologies, deploy thinner description and display a more condensed analytical range. They are diverse.

Classifying a work as ethnographic can be problematic, and Wacquant's (2002) quarrel is more concerned with the precedence given to quantitative, instrumental and uncritical prison research operating in the service of an aggressively expanding 'prison-industrial complex'. He demonstrates how the

growth of such correctional research has displaced the more open stance and critical opportunities of ethnography in the US. Although there was a period between the late 1970s and the 1990s when there appeared to be less prison ethnography occurring in the US, in line with Wacquant's identification of a dangerous 'eclipse' of prison ethnography (2002: 385), since the 1990s and outside of the US, ethnographic approaches to prison research have proliferated and thrived.

Ethnographic research has a long-standing tradition on the European side of the north Atlantic and perhaps is sustaining itself better. Thomas Mathiesen's sociological study of a Norwegian prison, described in his book *Defences of the Weak* (1965), was concerned with the extent to which the culture of prisoners in Norway mirrored or contradicted the culture of prisoners in American prisons (as described in the work of Clemmer, Sykes and others at that time). Mathiesen spent two years conducting fieldwork that aimed to capture the essence of Norwegian prisoner culture. His study offered a landmark contribution to the sociology of prison life because it demonstrated, in explicit terms, the importance of wider social and cultural norms on the shaping of prisoner societies. Mathiesen observed that, in Norwegian prisons, conflict between prison officers and prisoners took on a different form than that of American prisons. Conflict between staff and prisoners persisted in Norwegian prisons, but rather than manifesting through deviant prisoner countercultures, it took the form of more direct prisoner challenge of perceived inconsistencies or contradictions of 'the system' or, more precisely, the ways in which officers applied the rules and thus shaped the system. Mathiesen coined the term 'censoriousness' to describe this process, which he defined as a 'criticism of those in power for not following, in their behaviour, principles that are established as correct within the social system in question' (Mathiesen, 1965: 23). He further argued that the major functional element for censoriousness was that when officers were confronted with it, the lack of legitimacy on which their power was being wielded could be brought to their attention. These ideas have taken significant root in prison scholarship, perhaps most notably in the work of Sparks, Bottoms and Hay (1996) and their study of order in two maximum-security prisons in England and Wales,[2] which extended the idea of legitimacy as a key element of how prison order is won or lost. Likewise, the work of Alison Liebling and Helen Arnold (2004) on the 'moral performance' of prisons might also be viewed as having some genealogical connections to Mathiesen's earlier, groundbreaking work.

One of the first ethnographic prison studies in the UK, undertaken around the same time as Mathiesen's work in Norway, was carried out by Terence and Pauline Morris in London's Pentonville prison (1963). Their research provided a great deal of descriptive, ethnographic detail about Pentonville and drew comparisons as well as contradictions to the work of Clemmer and Sykes. Despite the relative importance of the work, as a strong critical and unrestrained

description of prison life, the work was viewed by Pentonville prison staff and prison administrators as a polemical reading of the prison and was thus viewed as a somewhat controversial contribution to the prisons literature. It is sometimes suggested (anecdotally by prison service administrators) that the relative dearth of in-depth studies of UK prisons throughout the rest of the 1960s and into the 1970s was, in part, attributable to reactions against the publication of *Pentonville*. Meanwhile, back inside the prison estate, the 1970s and 1980s saw the state of prisons in the UK as sites of central concern to policymakers and critical researchers alike. For over 20 years, British prisons were troubled by prisoner riots and disturbances. During this period, a number of studies and writings about prison life aimed to draw attention to the chronic failure of prisons or to question the extent to which experiences of imprisonment were fulfilling the supposed or official purposes of prisons as a social institution (see, for example, Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Fitzgerald, 1977; King and Morgan, 1980; Fitzgerald and Sim, 1982; Boyle, 1984; Carlen et al., 1985; King and McDermott, 1989, 1990).

Of particular importance was the work of Phil Scraton, Joe Sim and Paula Skidmore, in *Prisons Under Protest* (1991), which examined the problem of prison protests through the study of Peterhead prison in Scotland. Using a detailed, case study approach that drew on first-hand enquiry-based research that was, by its very nature, ethnographic in scope, the book eloquently evidenced the way '[l]ife in most British prisons is an unrelenting imposition of authority' (1991: 62). Indeed, this work and many others produced throughout the 1970s, the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s, though not strictly ethnographic, nevertheless captured in rich, detailed and angry description, the crisis that troubled the British prison system throughout these years.

Since the mid-1990s, ethnographic studies of prison life have widened in diversity, geographic spread and focus. Of particular note are Platek's work in Poland (1990), Bosworth's study on women in prison (1999) and the works of Jewkes in England (2002), Piacentini in Russia (2004), Bandyopadhyay in India (2010), Crewe in England (2011), Phillips in England (2012), Drake's account of the High Security Estate in England (2012) and Darke in Brazil (2013), indicating some of the wealth of ethnographic research that has emerged since the endarkening tendency was identified in the US by Wacquant. This collection now attests to a sustained stream of ethnographic works that, at least for the time being, has assured a strong ethnographic tradition in prison research.

Seeing the ethnographer: Ethnography through the lens of prison

Since the 1940s, in a variety of disciplines where ethnography has been practised, there has been a much greater emphasis in the research literature on examining the role of the ethnographer in the ethnographic process, with