

Chapter 7

Investigating women's imprisonment: practical issues

Introduction

Women's imprisonment is a complex phenomenon, and the researcher who sets out to investigate it may well be spoilt for choice of focus as she considers the kaleidoscope of social processes which together constitute the subject of this book. Those processes range along the whole spectrum of social control from the informal to the formal, encompassing en route the range of relationships within which gender is differentiated, each and every stage of the criminal justice pathways that may or may not lead women to prison, as well as the labyrinthine modes, meanings and metaphors of the prison itself, and its transcarceral and non-transcarceral alternatives.

The authors of this book have conducted extensive research in relation to women's imprisonment, though not all of it within prisons. Indeed, that is one of the first points that we wish to make: that an understanding of women's imprisonment requires investigation of many more social processes than those which can be understood from inside the prison gate. And we make this point now, because, for reasons which should become apparent when we go on to discuss the necessarily high levels of security with which gaols operate, prison administrators understandably allow very little (if any) undergraduate research to be undertaken within the walls. Therefore, although much of this chapter will discuss the ethics and practicalities of in-prison research, it will suggest several women's imprisonment-related research projects which

can be undertaken by undergraduates without benefit of prison access.

The second introductory point we wish to make is that the prison research site itself is also extraordinarily complex – and not like any other. First and foremost it is a mechanism of calibrated punishment for a society of captive lawbreakers, and this alone endows it with ethical dilemmas galore for the researcher who seeks to penetrate the secrets of its power. Yet, almost equally in importance, the prison is a multi-professional workplace for a miscellany of specialists working under several different, and often opposed, legal auspices and professional ideologies. This inter-professional dimension results in all prison personnel being acutely conscious of the multitude of ways in which their work within the prison puts them at risk of violating their own professional ethic or of falling foul of that of other professionals; and it can also make them wary of researchers, especially of any who fail to show their appreciation of prison staff priorities or institutional concerns. Then again, the prison is also a service provider of education, medical facilities, psychiatry, psychology, dentistry and social work; it is a long-term home (or even refuge) for some prisoners while simultaneously imposing harsh punishments and deprivations on others; and it is an institutional site governed by very specific legal provisions, violation of which puts transgressors themselves at risk of a prison sentence – as the cautionary notices outside prisons warn all entrants – whether inmates, staff, officials or visitors. Indeed, anyone entering a prison may be searched (even strip-searched) for contraband, and will almost certainly face prosecution if found with any once inside the prison. Finally, all the lawful activities of those who live, work or research within the prison have to be subjugated to the security demands deemed essential for keeping prisoners securely within penal custody at all times.

This final chapter of the book is not setting out to be a conventional chapter on methods. Rather, the authors merely wish to share some of their own experience of researching women's imprisonment, highlighting those issues which they themselves have found to be important, and providing students with a basic toolkit for 'getting started' on their own projects. For philosophical discussions of ontological and epistemological issues, and for philosophical and technical discussions of statistical technique, students should consult the many comprehensive 'methods' textbooks which are available.

Designing the project

Why careful project design is important

Project design is the most important step in any research, both for all the intrinsic reasons related to research efficiency, and all the extrinsic ones related to gaining access to the research site and competing for research funds. But above and beyond all the usual reasons for careful research design, the prison researcher has to be especially well-prepared: first, because the prison research-site houses people who are captives, and whose ensuing vulnerability entails an especial duty of care towards them (in terms of ensuring both the integrity and the publication of the research); and second because the secure nature of the prison means that once the research is finished it is usually impossible to return to the research-site and have a second bite at the cherry.

Project design checklist

Before you even begin to think of the project, do read C. Wright Mills's *Sociological Imagination*, (Mills 1970/1958). It has provided inspiration for several generations of sociologists since it was published in 1958, and its magic still works today. Then, before you begin the project, check that you have made the following plans:

- **You have formulated a research objective** either in terms of a question (or series of questions) to be answered, or in terms of specifying an 'object of knowledge' to be investigated via conceptual elaboration which will provide new knowledge.
- **You have decided on the most appropriate methods** for achieving the research objective.
- **You have made a timetable** for the various stages of the research project, including gaining access at the beginning and writing-up and disseminating the results at the end.
- **You have fully costed the project** – remember that everything has to be paid for: stationery, equipment, travel, payments to interviewees, researcher time, office, office staff, computer time and any other items specific to a particular piece of research.
- **You have made plans to cover all foreseeable practical, ethical, methodological and personal research-related issues** (e.g. *practical*:

have you familiarised yourself with the tape recorder? *ethical*: what will you do if you see someone acting unlawfully in the prison? *methodological*: have you decided on whether or not you will sample? *personal*: have you prepared yourself for how distressing prison interviews can be?).

- You have made plans for *dissemination* of your results.
- You have made plans for *leaving* the research site.

Gaining access

In order to do research in relation to prisons, probation, social work and the courts it is necessary to make a formal approach to the relevant service or agency, and, additionally in the case of the courts and prisons, to each of the occupational groups to be included in the research. Because of the complexity of the process, it is usually best for students to make the initial contact through an academic supervisor. The same applies to access to specialist libraries or archives.

It is frequently possible for the researcher to make a direct approach to individuals, voluntary organisations and campaigning groups though, there again, when possible it is as well to employ an intermediary who can vouch for your character and authenticity during the initial approach. When making a direct approach to a research access provider, one tried and proven method is first to write a letter briefly introducing the researcher and her credentials, explaining the research and the facilities required, and stating that this letter will be followed by a phone call in ten days' time. This approach has the following advantages: the recipient is given both information and time to reflect before there is a direct approach; the recipient does not feel 'rushed' into making a decision there and then; the recipient is not put to the trouble of answering the letter; the researcher has prepared the ground before making the direct approach, and when she telephones can concentrate on forming a relationship with the 'access facilitator' rather than getting bogged down in the details of research credentials and protocols.

Even when formal permission has initially been obtained from a service headquarters or agency, whether or not research access is finally granted will more often than not depend upon the impression the would-be researcher makes on the staff 'on the ground', those to whom will fall the burden of responsibility for ensuring that the research runs smoothly within the institution. In sum, whatever the eventual outcome

of access negotiations, getting access can be a long business, so make sure that you plan a realistic time scale for this stage of the research.

Do not, however, make the mistake of regarding the quest for research access as 'lost' research time. 'Gaining access' should be seen as an integral part of the investigation itself, and a research diary should be kept from the time that the first contact with the potential research-site is made. Access negotiations often reveal much about the research object, for example: power relations (including those involving gender, class and ethnicity; a range of (sometimes opposed) institutional and professional ideologies; and the most important institutional concerns in relation to, for example, security, professional competencies, working relationships. During this time the researcher has an excellent opportunity to learn the institution's research 'dos and don'ts' – a most important learning experience if she is to comport herself without offence during the lifetime of the project. In fact, 'gaining access' is such an important business that it merits a checklist of its own.

Gaining access checklist

- Make sure that the project you wish to do can be justified: theoretically (i.e. it will contribute new knowledge); and methodologically (i.e. the method is the most appropriate for pursuing the specified research objective).
- Find out as much as you can about the research site in advance: whatever, your 'ideal' research methods might involve, they have to be tailored to the operational exigencies of the particular research site. The degree of co-operation that even the most willing research-site host can provide will necessarily be constrained by, for instance, security concerns, professional ethical concerns, legal requirements, insurance requirements, and most importantly, working shifts. So be realistic and economical in your research requests.
- Make sure that both you and your research-site host are agreed on the research rules: that is, on the methods to be used (e.g. tape recorder or not?); on issues of confidentiality and anonymity; on sampling; on the research facilities to be provided; and on the timetable. Additionally, the researcher should explicitly ask that any particular legal or institutional requirements be brought to her attention before the research commences. (This is especially important in relation to in-prison research where the researcher may be asked by inmates to carry messages or engage in other activities which would be a

contravention of Prison Regulations.) As regards dress: our impression is that both staff and prisoners in women's prisons expect researchers to be smartly dressed.

- Ascertain if there is any way you can repay the research hosts for their hospitality (often provided at great inconvenience in terms of increased workloads or rearranged timetables). Research payback is often difficult in prisons, though staff themselves sometimes provide an opportunity by asking for advice about the provision of, and entry requirements for, various academic courses. When this happens, researchers should gratefully provide as much assistance as they can. Outside prisons, voluntary organisations and campaigning groups can nearly always use an extra pair of hands (or an additional brain or two), and many researchers feel that they have an ethical duty to make some sort of return in kind for the research help they have received. (A special consideration is required in relation to how involved a researcher can/should become with women ex-prisoners, and that is addressed later in this chapter.)
- Draw up non-technical explanations of the research aims which will be suitable for all the different groups you wish to involve in the project.

Contacting the interviewees or research participants

Once the researcher has permission to do the research, she will need to contact the interviewees, or in the case of participant observation or an observational study, the other research participants. Whatever method of making contact is chosen, ensure that, where applicable, it has first been cleared with the research host.

If prisoners are to be interviewed, it is best to send them a letter detailing the purpose of the research, the ways in which respondents' anonymity and confidentiality will be protected, what will be required of them, and emphasising that participation is voluntary. The letter should also indicate that although participation in the research will not harm prisoners in any way, it also will not give them any benefits in terms of advantages within or beyond the prison. As the introductory letters will most probably be delivered by prison staff (and the recipients may well discuss them with staff too) it is essential that the researcher take time (where possible) to secure the interest of the relevant prison personnel.

When volunteers are to be interviewed they should always be given a

document containing the following information prior to interview: a simple explanation of the sampling methods (if any) employed (i.e. why *they* have been chosen to take part in the research); a description of the research objectives and methods; the researcher's credentials and contact address; and the steps to be taken to safeguard respondent anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents' written permission to use the data from their participation in the research should also be sought prior to the commencement of interviewing or observation. However, in some organisations, different groups will wish to meet the researcher for further assurances, and in these cases the researcher should be prepared to be grilled about every aspect of the research (hence the checklists above). In these cases, too, prior understanding of the organisation should make the researcher better prepared for the specific organisational worries likely to be raised in the initial stages of access negotiations.

Finally, it is important that researchers assess the risks involved in any interview venues which they may set up. Interviewing women at home may involve contact with violent men, drugged or drunken companions, unruly children or fierce dogs. The interviewer may also receive invitations to partake in activities which she would rather avoid, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes or drugs. It is always advisable that the address you are visiting be known to an associate and that they also know when you are due back from the interview. You should also be prepared to abandon an interview if the setting is too noisy or in other ways unsuitable and if the respondent is less than coherent as a result of alcohol consumption or other drugs. Transcribing interviews is expensive, and there is no point in wasting time, money or labour on unusable tapes or recording schedules. We issue these dire warnings on the basis of some of the worst experiences which we have had over the years. However, we should also point out that the bad experiences have been the exception (and very few and far between). The vast majority of interviews which we have conducted in released prisoners' homes have been hosted by women who have gone out of their way to put us at our ease and whose generous hospitality has made the research experience quite life-enhancing.

Ethical issues

Most research institutions have their own codes of ethics for researchers and students and staff are required to submit their proposals for perusal by a research ethics committee prior to access approaches being made.

Professional associations also publish ethical codes, and in some applications for funding it is sufficient for an applicant to append the relevant ethical code and confirm that she will abide by its provisions. In other instances researchers are required to list the specific ethical issues which might arise in the research proposal under consideration. The most likely issues to arise in connection with women's imprisonment research are as follows:

Confidentiality of interview data

It is usual in social science research to guarantee that the confidentiality of all respondents' interview answers will be respected and protected. Yet a researcher who has been told by a prisoner that she is suicidal may find herself in a difficult ethical dilemma as to the proper course to take with this information, as may a researcher who is told by a prisoner (serving a sentence for child cruelty) that, unbeknownst to the prison authorities, she is pregnant, and intends to have the baby in a secret location to avoid having it taken away by social services. In fact, many situations can arise in a prison where the researcher is told things which burden her with knowledge which might have life-and-death significance and where the conventional rule of respecting the confidentiality of respondents can appear problematical. It is not possible to be prescriptive as to the right course of action for hypothetical situations, but here are some useful guidelines which can be followed when faced with a dilemma concerning confidentiality:

- seek advice from a research supervisor, mentor, colleague;
- outline the problem to the governor of the prison (or the head of any other organisation providing research facilities) as a hypothetical case and take her advice. It is especially important to check on the legal and ethical dimensions of the issue;
- remember that research should not proceed 'at all costs', and especially at risk to someone's life.

Anonymity of respondents

A major method for securing research co-operation is to promise respondents anonymity, to guarantee that nothing in the research report will lead to their identification. Two problems frequently arise: first, some respondents insist that they want to be named in the published work; the identity of other respondents is impossible to hide without damaging the report's authenticity by rendering everything about it

totally anonymous. In both cases, it is essential to discuss the alternatives with the relevant respondents, in an attempt to come up with a solution acceptable to all parties.

Respondents who want to see their names in print can usually be satisfied by an agreement to include their names in the acknowledgments. Others, however, want to have their names attached to each quotation. Some researchers would argue that this is fair enough, that the wishes of the respondent should be paramount. We take a different view, what some might argue is a more 'maternalistic' approach. We do so because we know from experience that upon release from prison women often see things differently to how they did inside. For that reason we would always try to persuade interviewees in prison to agree only to having their interviews quoted anonymously, and would suggest that the following procedure be adopted. When, for instance, a woman talking about engaging in drugs, prostitution, theft or other crime insists that she is not ashamed of what she has done, and wants her name attached to all quotations from her interview, it may be enough for the researcher to tell her that she (the researcher) cannot take responsibility for publishing a respondent's name in a context where it might be detrimental to her future life chances. If the woman insists on having her name associated with her quotations, the researcher might well have a duty not to interview her on those terms.

Equally difficult in relation to anonymising data is the case of the respondent whose position is unique to an institution (e.g. a prison only has one governing governor) or even a national agency (e.g. there is only one Chief Inspector of Prisons). Many occupants of these senior positions are quite happy to have their words attributed to them and then, where that is so, there is no problem (not for the researcher, at any rate!). But where the respondent would prefer to remain anonymous the researcher may be able to disguise identity by generalising rank; for example, a governing governor becomes, 'one of the governor staff', a chief inspector becomes 'one of the inspectorate', and so on. Maybe in these cases there is a loss of quotation impact as the respondent is reduced in rank, but usually the loss is of minimal significance and the alternative, of certainly revealing identity, would make it impossible to quote the respondent at all. The most important point here is that issues of anonymity and confidentiality must be discussed in advance with all respondents and the agreed strategy recorded in writing; together with permission to conduct the interview/participant observation and use the resultant data for the purposes declared in the research proposal.

Witnessing unlawful activities

What should a researcher do if she sees either a prisoner or a prison employee behaving illegally? This is a question that often arises in discussions of ethical dilemmas in prison research, yet it is not a dilemma with which the authors have ever been faced, though it is a possibility that each has considered. The conclusion they have come to is that unless the illegal behaviour involved physical abuse of a prisoner or an attack on an officer (if, for instance, they inadvertently witnessed an act of pilfering by an officer or prisoner) they would mind their own business (unless subpoenaed to give evidence in court). In the case of abuse of a prisoner, they would feel obliged to report what they had seen; in the case of an attack on an officer they would bear witness for the officer as required. Ultimately, this is an issue which researchers must decide for themselves – though, as with all the other ethical questions discussed here, it is as well to be prepared!

Payments to respondents?

When research is being conducted in prisons, prisoners are not allowed to accept money in return for giving an interview. In some prisons researchers are allowed to offer a cigarette or to buy a cup of tea for an interviewee during the course of the interview. However, any researcher wishing to put an interviewee at ease by proffering a cigarette or other refreshment should have the written permission of the governor (or authorised deputy), otherwise she will be at risk of prosecution.

Whether payment should be made to interviewees outside prison is an ethical issue. The Research Councils and other funding bodies have been known to allow for payments to respondents but seem to vary in their approach. Some have been known to allow payments on the ethical grounds that unemployed respondents should be paid for their time. Others have refused to respond to an ethical case, arguing that payments will only be made if an instrumental case is made that failure to meet requests for payment from essential respondents could put the research at risk.

We ourselves have never found that ex-prisoners have required payment in return for an interview. Indeed, most women prisoners agree to be interviewed before ever knowing that payment is available. In the one 'instrumental case' which came to our attention some male corporate criminals refused to grant interviews without being wined and dined and sent home in chauffeur-driven cars afterwards. The funding body paid up! Even without this example to hand, it has always

seemed to us that the practical (instrumental) approach to interviewee payment will usually operate to the benefit of the powerful and the detriment of the powerless.

We see no reason why professionals whose employers' agree to their being interviewed during work-time should be paid. However, lawyers and other self-employed persons may well argue that they incur financial loss while being interviewed. Many researchers, ourselves included, believe that poverty-stricken ex-prisoners should be paid for their time, while those who oppose paying ex-prisoners give the following reasons: that lawbreakers should not benefit from their crimes; that payments will be spent on illegal substances (researchers concerned about this often resolve the dilemma by making payment via food vouchers); that payments will result in respondents exaggerating their stories in order to be seen to earn their fee. In response, we would argue, first that any opportunity for an ex-prisoner to earn honest money is an unequivocal good. (After all, even the daftest explanations of female crime have never suggested that women break the law in order that they may some day have the chance to earn ten quid or so for a sociological interview!) Second, we hold that a person's right to be paid for her labour exists independently of how those earnings might possibly be spent. Lastly, although we have indeed found that there is some substance in the fear that paid respondents might assume an obligation to 'sex-up' their answers according to a mistaken idea that only thus will they earn their fee, we have also found that they usually make this assumption quite explicit by demurring when payment is first mentioned that they 'haven't anything very exciting to say. I'm just an ordinary prostitute, me'. Or, 'I just did cheque fraud for me habit. Then I just got nicked'. Demurrers such as these certainly provide opportunity for the interviewer to emphasise that 'ordinary' ex-prisoners are who she's interested in, that she's not a reporter, and that the 'boring bits' are what she wants to know about. Nonetheless, it is as well to stress to all respondents that you just want them to 'tell it how you remember it', that they will be paid however uneventful their stories are.

Whose side are we on?

The question 'Whose side are we on?' when we are engaged in empirical research was raised by the American sociologist Howard Becker (1967) in the 1960s in an article where he argued that sociologists researching contested situations should take the viewpoint of the less powerful because the world-view of the powerful is conventionally the dominant one. Becker's argument was opposed by fellow-American Alvin

Gouldner (1968), who argued that sociologists should not be taking sides at all, that they should be explaining the power structures wherein certain classes and ideologies become dominant. This latter position is most akin to that of the present authors, who hold to a belief that the task of a sociologist is either to explain empirical differences via theoretical constructs (rather than to determine 'truth' by judging between opposed accounts) or to produce new knowledge via the deconstruction and realignment of the already-known. Nonetheless, there are still research situations where the question 'whose side are we on?' is raised in one form or another, and where the answers are still seen as being contentious.

Women prison researchers should speak from the standpoint of women prisoners

We have already seen in [Chapter 6](#) how some feminist criminologists have argued a position which is similar to that of Howard Becker – that feminist researchers should ensure that the voices of the women they study are heard when the research is written up. Others, like Maureen Cain have even argued that feminist sociologists should themselves engage in feminist struggles if they are to write from an authentic feminist standpoint (Cain 1986, 1989, 1990). Although these are political issues that each researcher must decide for herself, it does seem to us that whether or not the researcher speaks from the standpoint of her subject should depend upon the research objective. If the main objective of the research is to represent faithfully how women prisoners claim to experience their imprisonment, then anything the researcher can do to enhance her own (and her readers') understanding of that experience will further the research object. (The same would apply if the main object were to faithfully represent how either male or female prison officers see their jobs in the prison.) However, as soon as one goes beyond description to explaining, or even to examining the conditions of possibility in which experiences can be represented one way rather than another, *then*, speaking from the standpoint of the prisoners is not enough, and close adherence to standpoint logic will almost certainly be obstructive of new knowledge or insights.

Prison researchers should appreciate the viewpoint of prison officers

A recent concern of a minority of prison researchers has been rooted in their contention that, over the years, there has been a growing tendency for a majority of prison researchers to pay so little respect to the concerns of prison staff that prison research overall has suffered from a prison-officer suspicion and resentment of researchers that has been deleterious

to prison studies in general. To remedy this state of affairs, Alison Liebling and her colleagues have argued for what they call a new mode of 'appreciative inquiry' in prison studies, a type of policy-oriented research which, instead of aiming at problem-oriented critique, 'appreciates' the best aspects of an institution and the work of its staff in order to get a more rounded picture ('truth') of institutional relationships (Liebling et al. 1999). 'Appreciative inquiry', they argue, is presented as a corrective to the overwhelmingly 'problem-oriented' approach of the last couple of decades. Yet, if the research object is clearly defined and the theoretical tools and protocols for achieving it plainly stated, neither 'problems' nor 'appreciation' should be uppermost in the mind of the designer of a research project. The aim of sociological research should not be to achieve as fully rounded a picture as possible of some empirical phenomenon. Rather, the aim should be to elucidate theoretically the relationships which make that empirical phenomenon take one or more of the forms it does. A sociological explanation, moreover, should in any case not only suggest why prison officers systematically do their job in the way they do, but why *any one of us* would be likely to do the job in that way if we were to do that same job under identical social and institutional conditions. In that sense, sociological inquiry has always been 'appreciative'. A fully sociological explanation or analysis, moreover, should never point the finger of blame towards individuals, but should, instead, indicate where structural change might be required. 'Appreciative inquiry', as defined by Liebling et al. (1999) is, by contrast, merely the flip side of 'problem-oriented' research. Both approaches imply an empiricist, policy-oriented approach rather than a commitment to theoretical critique untrammelled, at the moment of research, by consciously radical, feminist, official or any other political or policy concerns. This is unfortunate for the future of prison studies, as it cannot be denied that during the last decade there has been increased pressure on research grant applicants in general, and would-be prison researchers in particular, to make their projects more 'relevant' to the concerns of governments and/or prison authorities. How should researchers respond? Should they at least be on the same side as their potential funders?

Researchers should not 'trim' their questions or their findings to suit the policy agendas of governments or research funders

There is no reason at all, in theory, why a contract researcher should not produce work of integrity and originality. The concern about contract research in practice, however, is that too often the research questions are first of all trimmed to suit the interests of the official agency contracting

the research team, and that, thereafter, the results are further trimmed, or even totally suppressed, so as not to provoke any political embarrassment for the relevant authority, minister or party.

More insidious than the open partisanship of contract research, however, is the silent exclusion which many researchers today believe operates against any research which problematises powerful (or even conventional) interests. Pat Carlen (1994) has written forcefully about the effects of this on prison research during the last decades of the twentieth century, and more recent critiques of biased funding in the social sciences have been made by Carlen (2002f), Hillyard et al. (2002) and Walters (2003). Overall, we agree with all those who would exhort new researchers (and old ones too) to remember that constant confrontation is inherent in the nature of critique; and, moreover, that what we would call a 'critical' penology would be no more and no less than one which adheres to the liberal, classical ideal of science. That is that science should be: open; constantly recognising, questioning, and, if necessary, denying the conditions of its own existence; and neither 'trimming' its questions to make them politically correct or expedient, nor 'clubbing' – that is, pulling its punches – either to conform with contemporary academic fashions or political prejudices, or in response to downright bullying by either political or academic powers-that-be. For, above all, it seems to us that a critical penology must try not only to think the unthinkable about women's imprisonment, but also to speak the unspeakable about the conditions *in which* and *by which* it is known.

Leaving the research site

One of the surprises likely to be in store for the less experienced researcher into women's imprisonment is that leaving the research site can pose several new problems, most of them centring around 'feedback', dissemination and 'payback'.

Feedback

This is relatively easy, and refers to the researcher's obligation to provide feedback (where feasible) to research participants requiring it. Returning to the research-site to explain a research report may turn out to be a harrowing experience but the prospect of it should not affect the way in which the report is written. In our experience, research participants and funders are much more interested in the quality of the report than in whether its conclusions concur with their own political prejudices.

However, there are certainly known instances of the latter (prejudices) affecting assessments of the former (quality).

Dissemination

A researcher who has received public money to fund her research and/or who has received public co-operation in the research endeavour, has an obligation to disseminate the results where possible: by publication, media work or public lecture. Even undergraduates should make sure that copies of their final project are available at their research site. Postgraduates should seek advice about publication from tutors, the British Criminology Society and journal editors.

Payback

We have left 'payback' till last because, in our experience, it is one of the most difficult ethical and practical issues to confront a researcher on women's imprisonment. By 'payback' we refer to the question of the extent of the obligations which researchers may or may not have to women in the criminal justice system and women prisoners or women ex-prisoners with whom they become involved during the research. 'Payback' obligations can suddenly and often unexpectedly pose a most acute problem for researchers in participant observation studies and William Whyte's (1943) account of his post-research relationship with 'Doc' of *Street Corner Society* fame is still essential reading for first-time researchers today who, though their technical preparation for research may have been elaborate, may still be unprepared for coping with the human and emotional costs of social research.

The majority of research relationships are brief and unproblematical, especially when they involve nothing more than one short interview. Most respondents in most types of research situation have no further interest in either the research or the researcher once the brief research encounter has ended. However, in research involving more than one interview, after interviews of a very personal kind (e.g. life stories) or informal social interaction over a period of time (participant observation) respondents or other research participants may wish to prolong the relationship with the researcher beyond the research period. Alternatively, the researcher herself may have become so involved with the problems of the participants that she finds it difficult to walk away from them at the end of the research (see Liebling 1992).

We have found that the desire to prolong the research encounter has been more prevalent among isolated young women in prison who have no family and few friends; and among isolated ex-prisoners caring for

very young children. In the case of a young woman in prison, the sending of a card or letter may be sufficient to satisfy her desire for continued contact. Some cards will never be acknowledged, others may engender a correspondence that lasts for years. Some respondents may ask you to visit them in prison; ex-prisoners may ask you to visit them at home again. We would not presume to tell you how you ought to act if any of these situations should arise. Our purpose here is primarily to appraise you of what might happen so that you are not taken completely by surprise if it does. But we would suggest the following rules of thumb:

- Always inform the prison authorities if you intend to communicate with a serving prisoner after the empirical research period has ended;
- Before acceding to a request to continue to meet with a respondent after the research period has ended, assess whether or not it will be to her advantage, and try to answer the following questions:
 - What does she want from me? (companionship, money for drugs, legal advice, general support, financial assistance, sexual relationship);
 - Am I willing and able to supply what she wants?
 - Is it in her interest for me to supply what she wants?
 - Will I be able to end the relationship when I want to?
 - What risks, if any, are inherent in any continuation of this relationship?
 - What would be my motivations for acceding to this request?

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to discuss some of the most basic practical and ethical research issues, those which in our experience are often only touched on in research methods books but which, nonetheless, often preoccupy the empirical researcher for longer, and with a greater intensity, than all the other more cerebral research dilemmas put together. We have not dealt here specifically with the issues of doing research as 'women on women'. Those issues were addressed in [Chapter 6](#). Nor have we dealt with the major ontological and epistemological questions which have to be addressed before any academic research whatever can be undertaken. For discussion of these we refer you to the standard methods texts. Our

aim has been much more modest: to provide readers with some personally tried and tested practical tips about how best to address selected issues which routinely arise in empirical investigations relating to women's lawbreaking, prosecution and imprisonment.

All that remains now is for us to wish you good luck in your endeavours.

Further reading

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Topics for discussion

- 1 Are there any conceivable situations where an interviewer would be justified in breaking the 'confidentiality' agreement with a respondent?

- 2 Are there any conceivable situations where a researcher should put a research project at risk by breaking the 'confidentiality' agreement with respondents?
- 3 Should all, or some, respondents be paid? Why?
- 4 A prisoner becomes very distressed during an interview. What should the interviewer do:
 - Stop the interview for good?
 - Stop the interview and fix another time?
 - Ignore the woman's distress unless she herself wishes to end the interview?
 - Suggest to the woman that the prison authorities be informed and counselling sought?
 - Inform the prison authorities whether or not the woman agrees?
 - Review all the interview questions to avoid this happening with other interviewees?
 - Other?
- 5 A prison officer asks an interviewer if a certain prisoner made any remarks about prison staff during the interview. What is the appropriate response of the interviewer?

Project areas and topics

Undergraduates

It is unlikely – and even undesirable – that undergraduates will be given permission to do in-prison research. However, there is still a great deal of research into women's imprisonment which can be conducted 'on the outside':

- 1 Library-based research into the historical conditions of women's imprisonment.
- 2 Archive-based research into representations of women prisoners in the newspapers (investigate the British Library Newspaper Library).
- 3 Statistical and cross-national comparisons of women's imprisonment rates.
- 4 Use of policy documents available from the Home Office and The Prison Service to chart the policy changes in relation to female lawbreakers.
- 5 Investigation of EU and Council of Europe websites to compare European directives and policies with national policies.
- 6 Research in a specific non-custodial project for female offenders.

Postgraduates

- 1 How does women's imprisonment affect prisoners' families?
- 2 What are the main determinants of women's post-prison careers?
- 3 Whose (or what) interests are paramount in the organisation and administration of women's prisons?
- 4 How do women inmates survive prison?
- 5 How do female prison officers make sense of their jobs in women's prisons?
- 6 How are women prisoners viewed by the many and varied professional staff who come into contact with them while they are serving their sentence?
- 7 Do women experience imprisonment differently to men?
- 8 Investigate the history (and evaluate their work in relation to women's imprisonment) of one of the many prison reform/prisoner aid groups (e.g. Women in Prison; Prison Reform Trust; Howard League; Nacro; Hibiscus; Black Prisoners' Support Scheme; Clean Break; CAST).
- 9 What were the main reasons for the soaring female prison populations at the beginning of the twenty-first century?
- 10 What effects does their imprisonment have on released women prisoners?
- 11 What have, historically, been the main determinants of female prison population size in England and Wales?
- 12 Investigate changing justifications for sending women to prison.

Sources and addresses

Organisations

Amnesty International
99–119 Rosebery Avenue
London EC1R 4RE
Website: www.amnesty.org.uk

British Library Newspaper Collection
The British Library
Newspaper Library
Colindale Avenue
London NW9 5HE
Website: <http://www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html>

British Society of Criminology
Room G05,
Duncan House,
University of East London,
High Street,
Stratford,
London, E15 2JB
Website: <http://www.britsoccrim.org/index.htm>

British Sociological Association
Unit 3F/G
Mountjoy Research Centre
Stockton Road
Durham DH1 3UR
Website: <http://www.britsoc.org.uk/>

Catholic Agency for Social Concern
39 Eccleston Square
London SW1V 1BX
Website: <http://www.faithworks.info/index.asp>

Centre for Prison Studies
Institute of Criminology
University of Cambridge
7 West Road
Cambridge CB3
Website: www.law.cam.ac.uk/crim/index.htm

Churches Criminal Justice Forum
Catholic Agency for Social Concern
39 Eccleston Square
London SW1V 1BX
Website: www.ctbi.org.uk/chsoc/networks.htm

Criminal Policy Research Unit
South Bank University
103 Borough Road
London SE1 0AA
Website: <http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/cpru/>

Analysing Women's Imprisonment

HM Prisons Inspectorate for England and Wales
HM Inspectorate of Prisons
Room 1013
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT
Website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmipris/hmipris.htm

HM Prison Service for England and Wales
Directorate of Resettlement
Women's Policy Group
316 Abell House
John Islip Street
London SW1 4PLH
Website: <http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/>

Howard League for Penal Reform
1 Ardleigh Road
London N1 4HS
Email: howardleague@ukonline.co.uk
Website: www.howardleague.org

International Centre for Prison Studies
King's College London
School of Law
26–29 Drury Lane
London WC2B 5RL
Website: www.prisonstudies.org

Nacro
169 Clapham Road
London SW9 0PU
Website: <http://www.nacro.org.uk/>

National Probation Service
Home Office
Horseferry House
Dean Ryle Street
London SW1P 2AW
Website: <http://www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk/output/Page1.asp>

Penal Reform International
Secretariat
Unit 450
The Bon Marche Centre
241–251 Ferndale Road
Brixton SW9 8BJ
Website: www.penalreform.org

Prison and Probation Ombudsman
Ashley House
2 Monck Street
London SW1P 2BQ
Website: <http://www.ppo.gov.uk/>

Prison Governors Association
Room 409
Horseferry House
Dean Ryle Street
London SW1P 2AW
Website: <http://wavespace.waverider.co.uk/~prisgvuk/>

Prison Reform Trust
15 Northburgh Street
London EC1V 0AH
Website: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Quaker Prison Ministry Group
QPSW
Friends House
173 Euston Road
London NW1 2BJ
Website: www.quaker.org.uk/support/prison.html

Revolving Doors Agency
45-49 Leather Lane
London EC1N 7TJ
Website: <http://www.revolving-doors.co.uk/home.asp>

Analysing Women's Imprisonment

Social Exclusion Unit
35 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BQ
Website: www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

Women in Prison
22 Highbury Grove
London N5 2EA
Website: <http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/>

Women into Work SOVA
Unit 112, Aizlewoods Mill
Nursery Street
Sheffield S3 8GG
Website: <http://www.sova.org.uk/>

Web information on imprisonment and women's imprisonment

Council of Europe
<http://www.coe.int/portalT.asp>

European Journal of Social Work
<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/13691457.html>.

European Reintegration Offenders Services Project
www.erosproject.org

The European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, Human Rights Internet
<http://www.hri.ca/welcome.asp>

International Labour Organisation
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/>

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)
www.osce.org/

University of London, International Centre for Prison Studies
http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/rel/icps/prison_health.html

European Directives on Women in Prison
<http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/vol1/women.htm>

European Human Rights System

<http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/vol1/women.htm>

Parliamentary Assembly adopted recommendation/1450/(2000)
on the subject of violence against women in Council of Europe member
states.

[http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/documentation/
parasassembly/prec14502000.htm](http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/documentation/parasassembly/prec14502000.htm)

Recommendation 1469 (2000) Mothers and babies in prison

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

[http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/documentation/
parasassembly/prec14692000.htm](http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord2000/euro2000/documentation/parasassembly/prec14692000.htm)

Recommendation 1257 (1995) on the conditions of detention in Council
of Europe member states

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

[Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%2F
AdoptedText%2Fta95%2FEREC1257.htm](http://assembly.coe.int/Document/1995/199502/AdoptedText%2Fta95%2FEREC1257.htm)

European Directives on Social Exclusion

Recommendation 1582 (2002) Domestic violence against women

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

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[Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments
%2FAdoptedText%2Fta02%2FEREC1582.htm](http://assembly.coe.int/Document/2002/200202/AdoptedText%2Fta02%2FEREC1582.htm)

Domestic violence

Doc. 9563

23 September 2002

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

[Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%
2FWorkingDocs%2FDoc02%2FEDOC9563.htm](http://assembly.coe.int/Document/2002/200202/WorkingDocs%2FDoc02%2FEDOC9563.htm)

Domestic violence

Doc. 9525

17 July 2002

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%2FWorkingDocs%2FDoc02%2FEDOC9525.htm

Recommendation 1450 (2000) Violence against women in Europe

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

<http://assembly.coe.int/>

Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%2FAdoptedText%2Fta00%2FEREC1450.htm

Recommendation 1355 (1998) Fighting social exclusion and strengthening social cohesion in Europe

Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

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<http://assembly.coe.int/>

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Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

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Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly

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Recommendation 1261 (1995) on the situation of immigrant women in Europe Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly
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<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%2FAdoptedText%2Fta95%2FEREC1261.htm>

Recommendation 1229 (1994). Equality of rights between men and women Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly
<http://assembly.coe.int/>
<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2FDocuments%2FAdoptedText%2Fta94%2FEREC1229.htm>

Recommendation 1146 (1991) Equal opportunities and equal treatment for women and men on the labour market Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly
<http://assembly.coe.int/>
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The campaign of Amnesty International for a universal amnesty for all prisoners of conscience Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly
<http://assembly.coe.int/>
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