A Woman Inside: The Double Edged Sword of being a Female Researcher in a Total Male Institution.

I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.
~ F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Previously, it had been assumed that the fieldworker is ‘any man’ and that their personal characteristics, such as gender, have no bearing upon the development of trust in the research setting (Johnson, 1975). However, like many researchers (Gurney, 1985; Huggins and Glebbeek, 2009), in reality I found this not to be the case. This paper will suggest that in fact gender and the personal characteristics of the researcher play a central role within the research and whilst it can involve challenges these challenges can be embraced and utilised to improve the research outcomes as well as the experience of the researcher.

This paper reflexively explores the role of the researcher within an ethnographic study of prison labour drawing principally on the implications of being a female researcher in a total male institution. I spent ten months conducting fieldwork in a private prison in the UK named ‘Bridgeville’. The research explores the experiences of prisoners conducting privately contracting work during their incarceration. It develops an understanding of the work they undertake, their daily working lives, the working environment and their attitudes towards this work. I expected to face challenges with prisoner and had prepared myself (as much as possible) for these scenarios but what I handed prepared for were the problems that I would face with prison staff and in creating a role for myself within this difficult terrain.

This paper refers to the research setting as a ‘total male institution’ drawing on Goffman’s (1961) ideas of the total institution. Despite a small number of female staff members this environment is dominated by males where sleep, work and play are all undertaken in the same place, with the same people and, as such, these men have little contact with females during their incarceration. Thus, introducing a female into this environment will have an obvious impact. This will not only affect the prisoners, but there will also be implications for the solitary female.

The in-depth nature of my research meant that I spent most of this time in close contact with prisoners, sitting with them, working with them, joking with them and eating lunch with them on several occasions during their working day. This will inevitably have implications for the
interpretation of the research findings, but more than this, it has implications for me as a researcher. Illustrating the researcher’s experiences should not be done simply because it has implications for the research end result but also as a note to future ethnographers (Jewkes, 2012). It is hoped that the reflections in this thesis may be of use to future ethnographers who are dubious about entering a secreted environment. Jewkes (2012) argues that prison researchers should acknowledge the ‘emotional demands’ and ‘emotion work’ (p. 64) that prison ethnography entails. Whilst Jewkes (2012) refers specifically to prison ethnography here the same can be said for all ethnographic research.

It is important to reflect upon the role of the researcher within this environment, taking into consideration this somewhat dangerous setting and the gender roles that are played. It was found that while being female in this environment produced several challenges it simultaneously opened many doors and, in fact, my gender played a vital role in obtaining candid information and data. Given the ‘egos at play’ and the performances of masculinity that are a key aspect of prison life my non-threatening gender offered respite from this and allowed me to engage with prisoners. I will discuss the dangers, the dress code, the way in which my gender could be used as a key to entering this environment and also how my gender posed problems with both prisoners and staff. I will conclude that whilst my gender helped in gaining access and being accepted into this environment it would inevitably limit me. No matter how well I built relationships in this environment I did not join in with discussions of sexual conquests and at 5pm I went home whilst the prisoners went back to their cells. Therefore, whilst I was not an outsider, I most certainly was not considered an insider either.

References


