Looking through the Prison Gate: access in the field of ethnography*

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of 'access' within ethnography. Schatz's conception of access as finding the nearest possible vantage point lays the foundation for a discussion of 15 months of fieldwork conducted in Myanmar for a study of experiences of imprisonment that had little access to the inside of these institutions. The article goes beyond an understanding of access framed by a focus on inside and outside and demonstrates how accessing a field from multiple vantage points allows for various views and qualifies nuanced understandings. The article shows how space, time and interpersonal relations affect the vantage points accessible to the researcher. Further, it concludes that working with former prisoners after their release offers potentially clear vantage points that are inaccessible inside prisons.

Keywords: Prison, Ethnography, Qualitative Methods, Access, Myanmar, Fieldwork.

Access is an issue frequently discussed in prison research. Such discussions often revolve around the issue of getting permission to enter[1] prisons or certain areas of prisons and the practical issues of attaining physical access once permission is obtained (Watson and van der Meulen, 2018; Rhodes, 2001). This paper argues for expanding the ways we think about access. The first steps in this direction have been taken by researchers who maintain that access is an iterative process (Bandyopadhyay 2015; Reiter, 2014) and by prison ethnographers who use auto-ethnography as a tool to inform fieldwork and analysis and address access from this perspective (Jewkes, 2012; Rowe, 2014). These accounts are, however, mainly concerned with the process of gaining access to an institution, that is, entry to prisons. This article argues that in the study of everyday experiences of subjects, the understanding of access needs further unpacking. It argues that to understand the everyday life of prisoners, we need to know more than what goes on inside the prison.

This article is inspired by dilemmas faced during 15 months of fieldwork in Myanmar in 2016-2018.[2] I went to the field, knowing that I had not yet obtained access to prisons and that it would take time to convince the authorities to trust a researcher and grant access. The country has a history of authoritarian rule that has limited any tradition of openness and trust. The current situation, where political leadership takes the form of a nascent democracy, leaves authorities in a vulnerable position. Although there has been an opening of political space, a continued culture of fear remains (Skidmore, 2004), and authorities are apprehensive about opening prison gates to researchers. I could therefore had little expectations about obtaining access to prisons. I went to the field

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[1] Harrington identifies the interchangeable use of the words "access", "rapport" and "entry" as one of the indicators of the lack of conceptual reflection on access. Following Harrington "this article will employ the term 'access' because—unlike entry and rapport—access focuses attention on the social scientific goal of ethnography: access to information" (Harrington 2003:599)

[2] The fieldwork was divided into two parts, 8 1/2 months from October 2016 – June 2017 and 61/2 months from February to August 2018.

with a plan for what to do if access was gained, but also for the more likely scenario that all my work would take place outside prisons.

The majority of my fieldwork took place outside prison with no guarantee that I would ever be able to enter. Only by the end of my fieldwork did I obtain access to a prison for three days to conduct interviews with prisoners, followed by a one-day workshop with senior prison staff. During fieldwork outside prison I approached former prisoners and organizations concerned with prisons and prisoners. From there I snowballed my way to other settings and more research participants. While opportunities to talk to former prisoners were rich, working outside prison was very different from my previous research experiences (Jefferson; Gaborit, 2015; Gaborit, 2013). Even though I had prepared for this scenario, I was astounded by the experience of doing research about prisons from the outside. For months I felt in doubt about whether I was doing things correctly. Where was I supposed to immerse myself among potential research participants who led their lives in so many different contexts? Was I doing ethnography if my research mainly consisted of meetings with NGO's and interviews with former prisoners? Would I ever get close enough to everyday life inside these prisons that I had not even seen? Would I be able to put a meaningful description into writing?

These challenges forced me to reflect upon the methodology of prison ethnography and led me to the following questions, which will be discussed in this article: what is the field of prison ethnography? How does one get access to this field? And, subsequently, is the inside of prisons the ideal site to conduct research and what might other sites contribute to our understandings of prisons?

This article approaches these questions from three angles. The first section concerns finding the nearest possible vantage point (Schatz, 2009) and approaches the questions as a matter of space and distance, and discusses how different spaces affect relational distance or proximity to research subjects. The second section discusses how the positioning of the researcher can lead to

various vantage points. Finally, the third section includes reflections on what I learned after I entered the prison gates.

Access as distance and space – finding the nearest possible vantage point

Fieldwork is an essential part of most ethnography and has therefore been discussed for many years. Malinowski set the ground rules as he established the tradition for studying a secluded site, which would ideally be undisturbed, to observe the natives from a naturalist perspective. According to this approach, average prisoners are far from ideal research subjects:

> Those living outside their native state (for example native Americans working in towns; Aborigines employed on ranches; or, in Radcliffe-Brown's case cited above, prisoners forcibly held in a penal settlement) came to be considered less suitable anthropological objects because they were outside "the field", just as zoological studies of animals in captivity came to be considered inferior to those conducted on animals in the wild (Gupta; Ferguson, 1997:7).

Prison ethnography, being a study of institutions constructed by states, is far from the Malinowskian ideal; it is a study of people who have been removed from their homes, and of the everyday life that arises in this confined social reality (though the boundaries are blurred as argued by Cohen, 1985).

There is a remarkable contrast between the outset of ethnography, when it was undertaken to study strangers in remote and undisturbed territories, and the present day, when ethnographic methodology is commonly used to study familiar social structures, such as those in a prison. This illustrates how far ethnographic methodology has developed and how ethnography has a long history of methodological innovations.

Since Malinowski, ethnography has developed to fit the modern reality of globalization, in which most sites have been 'disturbed' by outside influences, and ethnographic methodologies are used to study phenomena across sites. In recent years the

development has continued as researchers have argued that ethnography is useful even for studies without actual fieldwork, because of the usefulness of an 'ethnographic sensibility' (Schatz, 2009). Some researchers go so far as to suggest arbitrary locations (Candea, 2007) and non-local ethnography (Feldman, 2011). Many standard procedures have been broken and adapted. Still, some prison researchers refer to the old ideals as they reflect upon their practices. When doing research in prisons, a researcher must adapt to security measures of the institution, which often conflict classic ethnographic methodology. This happens when researchers are confined to limited parts of prisons, at certain times, and are limited to speaking to predefined groups of people. Some go as far as describing prison ethnography as quasi-ethnography due to the limitations of immersion when working inside prisons (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

Although fieldwork is a key feature of ethnography, there are major variations in approaches to fieldwork and the demands of different field sites. In a discussion of the definition of the "field" of ethnographic fieldwork Gupta and Ferguson (1997:2) write:

> This mysterious space – not the "what" of anthropology but the "where" – has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity.

Since Gupta and Ferguson's analysis in 1997, others have transgressed this threshold of reflexivity in discussions on what the field of ethnography is and how ethnographic methods can be useful to other disciplines. This paper draws on discussions of 'the field' from Political Ethnography[3] (Stepputat; Larsen, 2015; Schatz, 2009) and Critical Psychology[4] (Jefferson; Huniche, 2009). Political ethnography contributes with discussions about what constitutes

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[3] Defined as the subfield of ethnography concerned with formal political procedures and their implementation (Schatz, 2009; Stepputat; Larsen, 2015).

[4] Defined as the particular subfield of psychology of German and Scandinavian critical psychology as a subject science (Holzkamp, 2013).

the field in studies of non-local phenomena such as policies, and how to approach research in places where access is limited. Critical Psychology contributes with discussions about how to approach the experiences of subjects by following their trajectories across different places (Dreier, 2003; Jefferson; Huniche, 2009).

While the field has transgressed the threshold of reflexivity since Gupta and Ferguson's famous work on locations, there is still some work to do to make 'access' transgress this threshold. In a review of literature about access within ethnography, Harrington (2003) concluded that while access processes have been discussed, our conceptual understanding of "access" remain fragmented. She identifies five ways access has been described: "'common sense", anecdotes, checklists, role-playing, and exchange" (Harrington, 2003:600). However, Harrington affirms that all these approaches lack a theoretical foundation. To overcome this fragmentation and create a theoretically informed understanding of access she suggests drawing on social psychology and particularly social identity theory (Tajfel; Turner, 1979) and self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1990). Harrington's analysis opens new paths by addressing how the 'skillful negotiation' that takes place in encounters between ethnographers and research participants affects access. This article seeks to further develop our understanding of access by discussing the interplay between our conceptual understanding of 'the field' and the access we seek.

The work of Schatz in his edited volume *Political Ethnography* (2009) is inspirational and takes the first steps in this direction, though there is still some distance to go. Schatz argues that: "access is a sliding scale, not a binary". Not only in prisons, but in all ethnographic fieldwork sites, "'inside' and 'outside' are no longer (if they ever were) meaningful categories to describe the access of ethnographers". Rather, Schatz (2009:307) recommends, ethnographers must "strive for the *nearest possible vantage point*". In my case, the prison was not the object of study itself. I was studying *experiences of imprisonment*. Not being allowed entry to the prisons thus forced me to reflect upon what the *nearest possible vantage point* to the experiences of others would be. Is

participant observation inside prisons key to understanding experiences of imprisonment? And where else might we find suitable vantage points for this object of study?

So where does a researcher go during 15 months of fieldwork about prisons if she has almost no access to those prisons? I spent my time at the offices of civil society organizations that work with prisons to learn about their work and talk to former prisoners among the staff. I went to teashops and restaurants for informal chats with former prisoners. I talked to former prisoners who now worked as taxi drivers, as we drove through the streets of Yangon. I attended events such as anniversaries of important political occasions, religious festivals and even the wedding of a former prisoner. I spent time at a rehab clinic, where drug users underwent voluntary confinement as part of their treatment and interviewed former prisoners among the clients. I went to monasteries and joined a meditation school, which was responsible for meditation courses inside some prisons. I spent time at the homes of former political prisoners and invited some to my home. My fieldwork took me around the city, as would the daily lives of people living in Yangon. I joined former prisoners in their daily life and witnessed how their past experiences in prison affected their current lives.

While at first, fieldwork outside prison was a pragmatic solution, along the way I realized that some places offered possibilities that had not been available in my previous work inside prisons. Sometimes, the skies would clear and my vantage point, though geographically farther from the place experiences had taken place, offered a clear view.

This happened several times when I visited former prisoners who still lived in the township where they had been imprisoned. Once, while sharing lunch in a local teahouse, a former prisoner pointed out to me that some of the other customers were wearing khaki pants. While they had taken off their jackets, their trousers revealed their identity as prison officers. The former prisoner had chosen this place for our lunch and now told me it was a regular hangout for prison officers. The visit to the teashop seemed like an

act of resistance. People in the area knew who he was, they knew of his past. His presence in the teashop was noticed, particularly because he was with a white woman and a local translator. There, where the officers could see but not hear us, he continued our conversation about how rotten the prison system was.

While he had gained freedom of movement after his release, he was still bound to this area. Much of his income came from the prison officers in the area and his business was located there. He could not afford to move the business to another area. Yet he was not happy with the presence of prison officers and he disliked being close to the prison in which he had been confined for years. Instead of avoiding them as much as possible, he appeared to confront them on his own terms. He participated in public debates about prison conditions and chose to eat in places where they were present. He insisted on having as much of a claim to the teashop and other spaces in the neighborhood as the officers – an affirmation that they have equal rights – a significantly different situation from what he had been used to in the relation to prison officers during more than a decade inside prison.

Previous discussions of the permeability of the prison walls have mostly focused on what goes into the prison and how this deviates from Goffman's description of the total institution (Goffman, 1961; Armstrong; Jefferson, 2017). In this example we see a different consequence of the permeability of prison walls, expressed in the increased presence of uniforms, prison officers and former prisoners in the vicinity of the prison. Though other rules apply on the outside, former prisoners as well as prison officers recall the rules in force when they were all on the inside. In this space, I became part of the struggle of this former prisoner, my presence supported his action, simply by the number of people accompanying him and by the signal value of being with a foreigner. I felt the alertness I also saw in him, when we saw the guards or when I drove past the prison on my way to and from our meetings.

Another former prisoner invited me to his home in a different part of town. After we had a chat about the ways he

supported other former prisoners and their families, he took me to meet his mother. They shared a home and he and his wife were taking care of her since she was sick and could not get out of bed. I experienced first-hand the daily frustrations and despair he and his mother faced because of the limitations of her illness. I sat next to her and spoke the few phrases I knew in Burmese, unable to understand her answers without the help of her son. Meanwhile, he was occupied looking through his books for documents from his time in prison. There was a sparkle in his eyes as he showed me the documents and told me about his acts of resistance committed while in prison. The sparkle faded when he explained that although he still wanted to be an activist, he had to take care of his mother and his family. Instead of working in the political movement for no or low pay, he took a less political job with better salary and job security. Before I left, he told me that he had invited me to his home to show me his real situation. That, for my research, it was important that I understood. I left his home full of emotions. I felt sympathy for his sick mother, and for the fact that he and his wife had to care for her, and deep respect for the strength he mobilized living farther from the struggle, yet part of it whenever possible, and to do all this with a brave smile on his face. This was the first time he allowed me to see behind the brave smile. Most of all, I left his home struck by how generously he had shared his life with me, allowing me to look into such intimate details of his everyday life.

For the study of personal experiences, a person's home can offer a particularly interesting vantage point (Szakolczai, 2008). Unlike a cell, where prison rules govern the amount and kinds of personal belongings a prisoner can have, and the ways in which he can make the cell his own, a home is a space that can be adapted to the needs and desires of the person living there. Much can be learned about a person simply by studying the ways he has decorated his home and the stories personal belongings tell. Furthermore, the home is a space for intimate relations, in this case, with the family members he lived with. It is a safe space, where research participants can feel more at ease sharing their

personal stories. Finally, the home is a place where the inhabitant choses who can enter. The homes I visited had no formal access procedures and I did not 'apply for access' by inviting myself. The research participants invited me to these homes.

The participant in the example above later told me that he wanted to engage with me because he had never seen anybody do research like this in Myanmar and he thought it would have great value. Later, a common friend told me that the research participant had said it was easy to speak to me about his prison experiences, because "I knew", because "I had been inside". That fact that I had experience working in prisons in other countries and had given him the impression that I understood the dynamics at stake, was enough for him to position me as a sort of insider to "the prison".

In both these cases, the former prisoners were able to use space as a way to show me their lives. Though I had talked to both for hours and tried to approach their experiences through words, these experiences added another layer to my understanding. They offered what Rhodes calls "a punctum" (Rhodes, 2015), a significant moment, where the shared embodied experiences led me to realizations about what could not be seen or put into words. The former prisoners used the agency they had outside prison to take me places and show me the limits of the freedom they had regained.

Because I was working outside prison, it was possible to follow former prisoners across contexts and into contexts that had particular significance for their experiences of imprisonment and in which they were less at risk and thus felt comfortable sharing more intimate details of their experiences. According to the German and Scandinavian schools of Critical Psychology, subjects are constituted through the different social practices they participate in, through their life trajectory across these practices (Dreier, 2003). Being able to move with former prisoners across different practices they participate in, offers the potential for a multifaceted understanding of them. When studying people in only one context, we risk losing sight of the multiple practices that they engage in

and of the trajectory across practices that shape them. If we only study prisoners while they are in prison, we risk mistaking the markers of culture for the individual differences and similarities that occur as a result of the trajectory across the different social practices the prisoners participated in before imprisonment (Jefferson; Huniche, 2009). Jefferson and Huniche, both psychologists by background who do research with an ethnographic methodology, argue that following people across different contexts allows studying *persons in practice.* Studying persons in practice does not only mean to study subjects and the context they act within, but to study subjects as they are constituted through their participation in social practices.

Doing fieldwork in which sites are chosen according to where the subjects of study participate, is in some ways similar to multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 2011). However, rather than defining it as multi-sited and across separated sites, Jefferson and Huniche argue that we need to develop our understanding of "the field" to encompass the various practices a person participates in:

> …a changing (less geographical) understanding of the field, brings the work of anthropology closer to studying persons in practice rather than studying the markers of cultures (Jefferson; Huniche, 2009:16).

Thus, we might consider the multiple practices a person participates in as one field, where the field is defined:

> As an epistemological construct, it is thus not necessarily spatially bound but depends upon the delineation of the social phenomenon under investigation (Meissner; Hasselberg, 2012:87).

When applying this understanding to the study of experiences of imprisonment "the field" expands to social practices that shape the way prison is experienced, that is, to the lives of prisoners before and after imprisonment.

In the two examples above, being able to participate in other
contexts and practices that are part of the lives of former prisoners,
enables understanding prison as only one nodal point on their life
trajectories. This approach offers a deeper understanding of the
former prisoners, while the prison as institution is downplayed as
one context among many.

Simultaneously, as I study "the field" it becomes part of my
own trajectory, which when visible to others affects the possible
ways in which I can be positioned and thus the access I am able to
gain. My life trajectory not only affects the way I am seen but also
the way I see my subjective experience (Holzkamp, 2013). I saw the
field through a specific lens colored by the stories I previously
heard from former prisoners and prison staff in Myanmar and by
my experiences inside prisons in the Philippines, Lebanon and
Sierra Leone (Jefferson; Gaborit, 2015).

Researcher positions as vantage points

Positioning is an ongoing process and as such, a general
discussion of the vantage points my positions offered during the
full period of fieldwork is arbitrary. I have been positioned
differently at various points of time by various people in various
situations. I have sometimes attempted to manage how I was
positioned, at other times I have been positioned without fully
knowing how or why or even against my liking. This section will
look at some of the instances when the way I was positioned
clearly had an effect on the understandings I could and could not
access.

When speaking about positions, researchers often describe
themselves according to certain dimensions, such as gender, class
and race. According to these dimensions I might be described as a
white (Danish), middle class woman. These dimensions are,
however, not fixed, but can be performed and interpreted in
multiple ways:

> All the examples suggest that finding a match between the researchers' identity and the categories available in the field is a matter of skillful negotiation of symbolic interaction processes rather than happenstance. Even seemingly inflexible traits like gender or race can be presented in a variety of ways, some of which are more strategic than others (Harrington, 2003:605).

These characteristics were not fixed, but rather flexible and could be molded to fit different positions. To understand the iterative process of positioning it is important to look closer at how these and other characteristics are brought into play, and for this analysis, how they affect the knowledge I can access. For the general reflections on these characteristics, I want to add that I was not just white or Danish, in Myanmar I was a "foreigner" – a stranger grouped together with the colonialists of the past and the aid workers and diplomats of today. Aware of the connotations of this position, I did my utmost to make it clear that rather than coming from abroad with rules and recommendations, I had come to learn, and I saw the participants in my research as experts.

Being a woman was a complex factor in fieldwork, and one which I admittedly still do not fully understand how affected my interactions in the field. Traditional conceptions of gender in Myanmar tend to grant more authority to men than women. In the cosmopolitan setting of Yangon, however, these gender roles are being challenged and there are many examples of women being respected as authorities. In my case, adding the qualification *young* woman would subtract even more from my possible authority, while the fact that I am a PhD fellow at a foreign university would add authority. Meanwhile, I dressed in a mixture of traditional Burmese and Western clothes. Most days I wore a *longyi* (Burmese skirt) and a t-shirt. In some cases this helped me fit in, in others it made me look more conservative than the young Burmese women. Since I mostly associated with men who had grown up before it was normal for Burmese women to dress progressively, inspired by western and Korean fashion, I decided to dress more conservatively.

Data is not just something we collect. It is generated through our engagement with the field, as we turn on the recorder, put our pen to paper or push the shutter of our camera. This has consequences for how we must think about access. We can no longer conceive of access as something we need to get to that place where we can collect data, but as an iterative and intersubjective process. In that process, the ways in which the researcher is positioned in interactions with participants affects what data it is possible to access and generate.

During my fieldwork there were several instances when it was clear to me that the way I was being positioned affected my access in the field. One instance was on a morning during breakfast with yogis outside the meditation center where I occasionally joined the weekly group sittings. The meditation center is connected to meditation retreats that take place inside prisons and some of the yogis are former prisoners. At the breakfast table two former prisoners introduced me to the other yogis. Quite predictably I was introduced as a researcher from Denmark, who was writing a PhD about prisons in Myanmar. However, the next part of the introduction, described here in an extract from field notes, surprised me:

> He then added that my uncle had been doing meditation for 25 years and was practicing the U Goenka method here in Burma too. Aung[5] corrected him and said, actually, it was quite recent that my uncle had found this specific method, I confirmed, only two years ago. Aung added, that now my uncle thought this was the best way in the world to do meditation. I am not sure that is exactly right, but I let it be (Field note, 2017).

I was only allowed to be present at this breakfast because I had myself become an *old student* – one who that taken at least one 10-day retreat with this particular school. I was, however, still a newcomer to the group, since I had only been coming to the

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[5] Pseudonym.

center for a couple of months at this point. Rather than sharing this information, the yogis chose to share the story of my uncle's long-term engagement with the method and position me as an insider by proxy.

This shows the vast possibilities for drawing on various aspects of our own past experiences and characteristics when we examine how a researcher is positioned and how that affects her access to the field. We therefore need to look not only at the classic categories such as gender, religion and class, but also at the complex processes through which aspects of our autobiography are put into play. In this case, we even moved beyond my autobiography and included experiences of a family member.

As the fieldwork progressed and I had spent more time in Yangon, not only my history but also the connections I made in the field gained importance. Because the fieldwork was conducted outside prisons, I had the chance to immerse myself through long-term fieldwork – to a degree rarely possible for ethnographers doing fieldwork inside prisons.

Bandyopadhyay describes the limitations and challenges prison ethnographers face when working inside a prison for a limited time and under the governance of prison authorities. While Schatz (2009) encourages us to think of access not as a binary inside/outside, but to look for the *nearest possible vantage point*, Bandyopadhyay reminds us that access is a continual process. She describes how during her fieldwork, she was performing a balancing act, building rapport with prisoners while maintaining the distance that was vital to retaining permission to access the prison. Furthermore, she describes how the limited access often confronts the researcher with a temporal limitation.

> The official structuring of the researcher's and the subject's time, the contradiction of subjects having all the time in the world, yet not having enough control over it to give it to the researcher as and when it was mutually convenient, the urgency to collect data quickly and the slow process of gaining trust – all these issues frame time in prison fieldwork (Bandyopadhyay, 2015:453)

Both prisoners and researchers are subject to the official structuring of time, though in different ways. When doing research outside prison, it is possible to avoid being limited by the official structures of the prison in the ways that Bandyopadhyay describes. When working in the streets of Yangon, I was not limited by authorities directing me to stay in certain areas, keep a certain distance from (former) prisoners or to come and go at certain times. I was able to let the life of the former prisoners be the guiding principle for where to go and how long I could stay. Still, I had to be aware of how my presence in different contexts and relations with various people might affect the way I was perceived by authorities, if I were to gain access to the prisons one day, and in relation to various groups of former prisoners who in some cases had conflicting opinions. Thus, while I was able to move more freely outside the limitations of prisons, some limitations remain in any field ethnographers engage in.

My various alliances were brought into play by several actors. At one point, a former prisoner who knew I was negotiating with authorities to gain access to the prison told me to 'speak to your friends in the ministry'. I felt resistance to being positioned as someone with friends in the Ministry of Home Affairs by someone who had been imprisoned for his fight against these authorities and who was still engaged in that struggle. When I finally gained access to the prison, prison authorities confronted me with a picture of me in a teashop with a former prisoner who was an avid critic of the prison system. It was the same former prisoner who had taken me to the teashop where prison officers came as described above. I knew he had uploaded pictures of our meetings on his Facebook and that they had gained a lot of attention. The authorities asked me what I was doing with him. I calmly replied that I spoke to him about his experience as I had spoken to many former prisoners. They asked me if he had said bad things about their prison, I replied that he had said good and bad things like many others and that I was sure they already knew what his critique of the prison was. When I was first confronted with the picture I was afraid it would cause problems, but after my short

explanation the picture was put away and the atmosphere relaxed. I had not lost the access to enter the prison gate, but I had surely been positioned in a way that would affect the level of trust from some prison officers and therefore my access while inside. The various situations I participated in not only offered different vantage points. I too was observed when I accessed vantage points, in this case, the vantage point served as a platform for the former prisoner to show our connection to the world.

These two examples point to how my connections affect how I am positioned. And my own reactions show how I am more comfortable in some positions than others. For the purposes of this study, I sought to throw a wide net to connect to various actors. As a person, however, my allegiance to the prisoners is stronger than to the authorities. I therefore felt uncomfortable when positioned as having "friends in the ministry". Being associated with a critic of the prison on the other hand raised my concerns about the possible consequences of this position, but as an abolitionist at heart, it did not make me uncomfortable about how I was perceived. This speaks to the long debate within prison research about "whose side are we on" (Becker, 1967; Liebling, 2001; Sim, 2003) and Skidmore's notion of 'writing against human suffering' (2004). It also illustrates that the issue of balancing between building rapport and distancing is not exclusive to work inside prisons. Inside prisons the risk of the gate being closed might enhance the importance of this balance and prevent you from getting 'too close' to prisoners, since prison authorities are able to surveil your work. Outside prison, I enjoyed the privilege of being out of sight – both of research participants who may have differing opinions, and of authorities whose approval I would need to gain access to prisons. This enabled me to move between different groups. Over time, however, as I became more established in the field and my connections grew stronger and stable so did my positions. I was no longer a newcomer with a clean slate; I was a yogi from the U Goenka tradition, someone who had talked to many former political prisoners and someone who had been trusted with access to the prison. All of these positions ascribed me

with an authority to speak about the prisons but were also positions that narrowed the playing field within which I could chose my vantage points. As time went by, I became more familiar with the view of the vantage points I had accessed, though my flexibility to access new vantage points through different positions was limited.

Postscript – the view from within

When I had less than three months left of fieldwork I received an email stating I had been granted access to Central Prison Insein in Yangon. Together with my research assistant, I reviewed the permission letter. As he translated it we realized it stipulated that my access was for three specific dates, the first of which was the following day. Within moments, my situation had changed. Over the following two weeks I conducted three visits to Central Prison Insein and one month later I visited the prison one more time to conduct a workshop with senior prison staff.

The HQ of the Myanmar Prison Department assured me that special security measures were taken for the days I would visit. Inside the prison I was escorted by two senior officers, one male and one female and a junior officer documented the visits with a camera. When we walked across the prison compound to reach the meditation ward where part of my work took place, staff saluted my senior companions and all of the prisoners kneeled into squatting positions. Though I was finally inside the gate, it was clear that I did not have access to observe normal everyday life inside the prison. My visits offered me a specific vantage point, seeing the prison through an extraordinary visit. Even so, it was a vantage point that revealed a lot about the prison. Though parts of the visits showed a beautified version of the prison, a charade within the control of the authorities, the prison would sometimes show its ugly face. I saw prisoners falling through the less than human sized doors of the gate when forced to wear foot-chains when going to court, prisoners removing their own foot-chains with a hammer and anvil and heard the deafening level of noise

outside the visiting rooms. I saw glimpses of what the authorities wanted me to see as well as what they preferred to keep unseen. As the visits progressed, the officers were more relaxed in my presence. It became possible to move to more areas of the prison and my entourage decreased to just one officer.

During the visits I was able to interview 10 prisoners, always with prison staff in the room, within sight, but outside hearing range. Interviews took place in the meditation ward, the female ward and the office of a senior officer. All prisoners appeared for the interviews in their best clothes. The men in standard blue prison uniforms, which were cleaner than those used by most prisoners we walked past. The women wore white shirts and brown *longyi*, which is how they dressed when they would leave the prison for a court hearing. The meditation ward had the most relaxed environment, and here the interviewees took more freedoms to add opinions and stories about their lives that were not directly called for by my questions. In the female ward the freedoms interviewees took varied, while the variance seemed somewhat connected to the level of authority of the prisoner being interviewed. In the officer's office, interviews were more formal. One interview almost took the form of an exam, as the interviewee entered the room very nervous and remarked he was not sure his answers were good enough, since he had 'never done a question and answer like this'. The situation was further complicated by the fact that his mother tongue was an ethnic language my translator did not master and the prisoner spoke little Burmese. He calmed down as I assured him there were no right or wrong answers to my questions and that I could relate to his problems with the Burmese language, since I myself was still unable to master it after a year's study. Like outside prison, the content of interviews varied depending on the context in which they took place. The contexts varied from a familiar meditation ward, to an office that was meant for officers rather than prisoners. Most importantly, none of these places were chosen by the prisoners. While the interviews generated rich data about a specific part of the prisoners' life in

prison, their experiences with meditation, they only represent a fragment of what it means for them to be prisoners.

The prison visits allowed me to catch a glimpse of the mysterious context I had been working with for so long, but had never seen for myself. The visit included few surprises, but confirmed the understanding of the prison I had gotten based on fieldwork outside. The previous fear about whether I understood this place I had never visited was alleviated.

So was the prison visit key to understanding experiences of imprisonment? Yes and no. Outside prison, a wider spectrum of possible vantage points and adequate time to get close to participants created rich possibilities to access intimate experiences and the multiple social contexts that constitute former prisoners. Inside prison, it was challenging, if at all possible, to build the trust necessary to be allowed access to such personal experiences and they could only be understood through the one social practice the prisoner participated in at the time. Therefore, access to prisons was not essential to the study of experiences of imprisonment, although it offered an added value through familiarity with the prison, an added flavor to the stories I had previously heard. For studies of other aspects of imprisonment, access to the inside of prisons likely has increased importance. For example, during prison visits it was possible to observe the social interactions – between prisoners as well as between prisoners and prison staff – in detail.

Conclusion

If prisons are so inaccessible, why not leave such challenging contexts behind and settle for countries where gates to prisons open more willingly? Or, institutions that are open to the scrutiny of a researcher? Because it is necessary to scrutinize what happens behind closed doors (Jefferson, 2014). As Schatz affirmed in relation to political ethnography:

> If one lets relative accessibility dictate the terms of research engagement many fundamental questions about politics will go unaddressed (Schatz 2009:307).

Engaging with these fundamental questions and venturing into challenging fields of research calls for thorough methodological reflections. This offers a potential for creative development of ethnographic methodology (Reiter, 2014). As prison ethnographers can learn from political ethnographers or critical psychologists, prison ethnographers can share lessons learned from engaging an extremely challenging context with ethnographers working in seemingly accessible fields. While these conclusions are developed through analysis of prison research, they raise issues relevant to all ethnography.

To conclude, let us return to the main questions of this paper – what is access? And what is the nearest possible vantage point? In agreement with previous research the article has demonstrated how access is an iterative process. The analysis has exemplified how reflection upon one's own positions in the field can increase the opportunities to access multiple possible vantage points while in the field, as well as improve the understanding of data. Lastly, the article has called for understanding the field as a social phenomenon rather than a geographical location.

When doing prison research, 'the field' is more than the prison. When studying experiences of imprisonment, the field is constituted by all the contexts included in the social phenomenon of imprisonment (Jefferson; Huniche, 2009; Meissner; Hasselberg, 2012). Prisoners and staff have a life outside prison – even if it is sometimes a past experience or imagined future. Therefore, the inside of prison is not always the most suitable site for prison research. Depending on the specific topic of research, other sites might offer just as good and sometimes even better vantage points. This calls for prison researchers to not only seek access to the insides of prisons, but also to the lives of prisoners before and after imprisonment. These tasks can be just as challenging as gaining an official permit to enter a prison. It is no easy task to identify

possible future prisoners or seek out former prisoners trying to escape the stigma of the label as "prisoner" (Gaborit, in preparation).

This article demonstrates the importance of examining the life trajectories of (former) prisoners because of the effect they have on the way (former) prisoners ascribe meaning to experiences of imprisonment. By following prisoners, as they move across space and time, by going beyond the limitation of conducting fieldwork only "inside" prisons, it is possible to better understand prisons as institutions and the effects they have on people who pass through them. This approach has consequences not only for our understanding of prisons and confinement but also for a general understanding of "the field" of ethnography. It shows the potential of understanding "the field" as an entangled web created by the life trajectories of the participants in the social phenomenon under study. It calls for ethnographers to go beyond a binary understanding of access as determined by an inside and outside, and rather see themselves as moving around within the web of life trajectories that compose the social phenomenon of the field.

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