

Facing the Diversity of Carceral Environments in Prison Research: Lessons From my Fieldwork with Women in Three Prisons in Spain*

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Abstract

Reflections on methodological and ethical issues have been emerging progressively in prison research. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this debate from a feminist approach considering the particularities of the Spanish prison context. The article will explore a set of issues associated to gaining entrance to a penitentiary institution, the relationship between the researcher and participants as well as other aspects of fieldwork to reflect on their implications for the process of inquiry. By sharing research experiences and recognizing the role of emotions in social research, we can learn from each other and strengthen the toolkits available, contributing to the construction of social research as a genuinely humane activity engaged with social justice.

Keywords: Prison Research, Feminist Criminology, Reflexivity, Spain, Women's Prisons.

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Introduction

Reflections on methodological and ethical issues in the social sciences, and specifically in criminology and prison research have been gradually emerging in recent decades (Bosworth *et al.*, 2005; Calderón, 2018; Crewe, 2014; Downing; Polzer; Levan, 2013; Duarte; Gomes, 2017; Gelsthorpe, 1990; Jewkes, 2011, 2014; Liebling, 2001; Lumsden; Winter, 2014; McCorkel; Myers, 2003; Phillips; Earle, 2010; Piacentini, 2013; Schlosser, 2008). However, few writings are found about these issues in the academic literature, which is partially explained by the traditional predominance of quantitative methodology, which is often considered the most valid and rigorous, and by an approach that sacralizes a particular concept of objectivity and distance to the object as key aspects of scientific research (Flavin, 2001; Gelsthorpe, 1990; Jewkes, 2011; Renzetti, 2013). Challenging these assumptions from a feminist perspective, Donna Haraway defines feminist objectivity (1991) as *situated knowledges* (italics in the original). In this sense, she points out that this objectivity is about “limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (1991:190) and requires that the object of knowledge be conceptualized as an actor and agent (1991:198). Particular attention is paid to the production of knowledge, understood as a “story-telling practice in the sense of historically specific practices of interpretation and testimony” (Haraway, 1989:4) and to the role that the “object” plays in the social construction of science (Haraway, 1989), highlighting the frequency of situations where subjects are denied agency and their voices are appropriated (Haraway, 1991).

Within the framework of ethnographic research on prison and confinement, some authors have begun to consider problems emerging from scientific inquiry (Gelsthorpe, 1990; Jewkes, 2011; McCorkel and Myers, 2003; Piacentini, 2013). These issues involve methodological and ethical decisions along with reflections on the positionality of researchers and the way power and control shape prison research. The concept of reflexivity

refers to identifying the assumptions underlying the research endeavor and often includes the investigator's reaction to doing the research (...). Reflecting on the research process calls attention to possible sources of bias introduced as well as provides guidance to future researchers (Flavin, 2001:278).

Practicing reflexivity demonstrates a commitment to good research practices that seek the visibility of women and other historically marginalized groups and to increase the involvement of subjects in the research process (Flavin, 2001). Reflexivity also helps to strengthen the research process by promoting "honesty and awareness of the limitations and biases inherent in the research" (Flavin, 2001).

In Southern European countries, the development and visibility of these reflections are very limited even today. This shortcoming is partially explained by the fact that criminology and prison studies are less institutionalized and consolidated than other fields but also due to obstacles to making research contributions from non-Anglo-Saxon scholars internationally visible (Faraldo, 2018; Larrauri, 2008; Medina, 2011). However, in recent years scholars from Southern Europe have offered reflections on the role that researchers play in the field as well as the associated methodological and ethical dilemmas (Duarte; Gomes, 2017). In the same vein, Cunha (2014) points out the importance of being aware of the historicity and cultural context of the ethnographic inquiry in order to broaden the scope of reflexivity (Cunha, 2014:226).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to this international debate from a feminist approach by considering the particularities of the Spanish prison context and analyzing its impact on my research. Specifically, I will reflect on a set of issues concerning gaining entrance to penitentiary institutions, the relationship between the researcher and participants as well as other aspects of fieldwork and explore their implications on the research process, the nature of data collected and my positionality as a researcher.

For this purpose, I will first briefly summarize some of the main contributions to reflections on reflexivity in criminology and prison studies and place this concept within the framework of feminist approaches to the social sciences, particularly criminology. Secondly, I will describe the context and main characteristics of my research in three women's prisons in Spain as an introduction to the third section in which I analyze different moments and aspects of my fieldwork that influenced the development of the research, my positionality in the field and the conditions and specificities of the data collected. I then offer some concluding remarks.

Reflexivity and feminist criminology

One of the subfields of criminology where reflexivity has emerged as a key issue is feminist criminology. Beginning in the 1970s, a group of scholars began to point out gender biases in criminological theories (particularly those related to women offenders) and the absence of women and girls in the study of crime and the criminal justice system. In 1990, Gelsthorpe summarized the main problems and pitfalls of feminist perspectives in criminology, and they are still present today. The first is the choice of topic, moving from approaches more focused on making women and girls visible in research and theoretical contributions to more recent developments that draw attention to feminist and queer critiques of identity that affect the understanding of punishment (Bosworth; Kaufman, 2012). The process of inquiry emerges as the second topic of interest, highlighting the debate between quantitative or qualitative research (see also Renzetti, 2013) as well as the specific way to conduct fieldwork and use research techniques. The third issue is the specific role that power and control play and the importance of identifying ways to reduce the distance between researcher and researched. Finally, reflexivity, as previously discussed, leads us to consider how feminist researchers locate themselves in the research process and involves a reflection about the decisions and actions taken during the inquiry. According to McCorkel and Myers (2003),

feminist standpoint theorists contend that the researcher's positionality affects all aspects of the research process –from the articulation of a research question to the analysis and presentation of the data (McCorkel; Myers, 2003:199).

In the previous discussions, the need to consider the role of feelings and emotions in the scientific process is either explicitly or implicitly reflected. As social products (Lutz and Abu-Lugod, 1990), feelings and emotions have fundamental social effects and are modes of power (Haraway, 1989). This approach to emotions employs the Foucauldian concept of discourse as a starting point. Thus, the production of knowledge through scientific discourses in prison research reflects situated social practices that establish, assert, challenge or reinforce power or status differences (Lutz; Abu-Lugod, 1990); our reflections on the scientific process and our positionality are intertwined by the same elements. Additionally, in prison research, feelings and emotions are socially produced in an environment where dynamics of control and a strong hierarchy shape all the relationships within the institution. This process is also mediated by other variables that constitute a matrix of oppression (Collins, 2000) such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and others (Bosworth, 1999; Burgess, 2006; Chesney-Lind; Morash, 2013; Flavin, 2001; McCorkel; Myers, 2003; Gelsthorpe, 1990, 2002; Heidensohn; Gelsthorpe 2007; Phillips; Earle, 2010). As a result, the different ways in which the state and gender (and other variables) are mutually constituted emerge as key aspects to consider in our reflection on prison research and knowledge production (McClintock, 1995; Corazza, 2017; Vianna; Lowenkron, 2017). The prison as a state institution intertwines with other categories, such as gender, race and ethnicity to create particular situations and produce inequalities that must be assessed during the research process (McClinton, 1995; Corazza, 2017; Vianna; Lowenkron, 2017). Therefore, in prison ethnography, researchers should consider their own positionality and scrutinize how these variables influence their relationship with the participants and the research process as a whole (McCorkel; Myers, 2003; Phillips; Earle,

2010; Piacentini, 2013). According to McCorkel and Myers (2003), positionality provides a set of narratives that researchers use to make sense of the world and scientific inquiry is almost exclusively conducted by members of dominant groups in ways that reflect and enhance their situated interests. Therefore, the master narratives of researchers tend to legitimize and naturalize the order of things and thus subtly and indirectly affect our approach to the field and every part of the research process (McCorkel; Myers, 2003), including the interpretative account (Piacentini, 2013). Adding nuance to these appreciations, postcolonial and feminist scholars warn of the danger of appropriating “subjugated knowledges” (Haraway, 1990), highlight the condition of “subaltern subjects” (Spivak, 1998), and the difficulties that they have to speak, because they are not considered part of the discourse. These scholars also express their concerns about attempts to “save” others (Abu-Lughod, 2002), highlighting the need to consider our responsibility in the process. Therefore, the issues of responsibility, accountability and ethics of knowledge production must occupy a central position within prison research (Alexander; Mohanti, 2010).

There are some, but not many, academic works that provide reflections and recommendations for dealing with these issues. In considering her study at a men’s medium-security correctional facility that involved interviewing inmates, Schlosser (2008) discusses key aspects such as access to prison, negotiations with institutional review boards, the construction of study concepts and instruments, inmate identity, and institutional influence. Jekwes (2011) presents some ways to minimize the varying degrees of power and access to resources such as refusing the offer of keys, using prison slang and making clear to participants at the outset of each interview that one is a university researcher with no particular agenda, political or otherwise. Other interesting contributions analyze the role that space plays in prison research (Mehta, 2014) or focus on research participants, their aspirations and the emotional impact of being part of a prison study (Bosworth; Campbell; Demby; Ferranti; Santo, 2015).

Contextualization: prison research in Spain

The Spanish prison system has about 70 prisons, although only four of them are women-only prisons. As a result, most female prisoners serve their sentences in carceral spaces where the vast majority of inmates are men. Normally, these facilities share the same architectural design (known as a center-type “centro-tipo” in Spanish, or macro-prison) consisting of 12 to 14 departments or sections, with one or two reserved for women. I carried out the fieldwork for my PhD research with women in three prisons: two macro-prisons with one or two female departments and one women-only prison. While the two macro-prisons shared an almost identical architecture, the third had a completely different organization. In fact, the building had first served as a prison for young inmates and was then converted into a female prison. The tradition of placing women offenders in buildings previously used for other purposes, such as convents or reformatories, presents interesting messages about the construction of gendered subjects within state institutions. Next to the third women’s facility there is a macro-prison for men and the prisons share the main entrance. In contrast with a macro-prison, this female prison is organized into several small houses (departments), with no high prison walls and with green areas in the middle. The institution has a greater sense of openness and freedom of movement and the atmosphere (due to the space as well as the organization of daily activities) is more relaxing than in the other two prisons included in the research.

The choice of cases for the study was based on various criteria including the objectives of the research, the particularities of the subject of study, and empirical evidence gathered in studies on female imprisonment. The first penitentiary selected was the so-called *Jupiter* prison¹, and the choice was based on the importance of this facility for understanding the program that was the subject

¹ The names of the prisons are fictional.

of my study: Respect Modules (RMs).² The philosophy behind the intervention was originally developed in the Jupiter prison and it is where the “purest” image of how the program works can be found. In this prison, there is one female department and another where men and women live together.

The second prison selected is the women's prison *Athenea*. Despite the limited number of women-only prisons, many feminist scholars of female incarceration affirm that women should serve their sentences in women-only prisons. This is why this facility was chosen. The final location is the third penitentiary facility, *King* prison, which has only one women's section, while all the other sections are designated for men. This is a common trait of the Spanish prison system, in which women serve their sentences in facilities mainly populated by males.

While the *Jupiter* prison was selected because it was where the Respect Modules program originated, the choice of the other two cases allowed for some flexibility. In this vein, considering my intention to visit the prisons regularly, combined with my limited budget and my work commitments, I had to find prisons located near home. I completed my PhD without financial support, so during most of the years I was in the PhD program I conducted my research and a few extracurricular academic activities, while holding a full-time job outside the university that was not related to my research interests. For this reason I chose two prisons approximately 50km from my residence, which allowed me to visit them once a week after work during a period of 9 to 10 months. The other prison was 350 km away, so I spent two intensive periods of around one week each at this prison.

² For a description of the Respect Modules program, see: Cendón, Belinchón and García (2011) and for an analysis, see: Ballesteros Pena (2017) and Ballesteros-Pena (2018). The purpose of the research was to analyze gender equality policies implemented in Spain as a result of the approval of a national Gender Equality Action Plan. One of the measures prioritized in this plan was the implementation of the Respect Modules program in women's prison facilities, since it was considered particularly beneficial for them. The research thus tried to consider the different types of facilities where women are incarcerated.

With regards to regulations concerning entry into a Spanish prison, the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions has strict guidelines (11/2005-SP) that regulate research inside prisons. To gain access to a prison, the researcher should submit a document to the Secretariat stating the research goals and the main activities planned. This document is assessed by prison authorities and a formal response is sent to the researcher. My authorization included information about how to contact each prison manager so that I could organize the first visits. My permit was sent to each prison, with a copy left at the entrance that was reviewed by the guards every time I entered each prison. For the first visit, my strategy consisted of calling the prison director to arrange a meeting with him and/or one of the deputies responsible for the different departments, and to conduct a first interview, present my research goals and organize how to proceed with my regular visits. In the case of the *Jupiter* prison, the first visit also included the initial formal period of fieldwork, due to the distance from my home. Thus, in this particular case, the first contacts by phone with one of the deputy heads, necessary to organize the visit, were more frequent and intense.

Regarding the fieldwork plan, the methodology mainly consisted of semi-structured interviews with inmates but, considering the subject of study, I also carried out some semi-structured interviews with prison staff to capture their understandings of the new program. However, this interest was secondary, and the main focus was on talking to women prisoners. Apart from interviews, I also participated in several daily prison activities, such as staff meetings, regular meetings between inmates and the social educator, and special events, such as “family day”, during which relatives can visit the prison and inmates organize a music festival with food.

Reflections from the fieldwork in three women's prisons in Spain

As Schlosser (2008) points out, the researcher's role, personal interactions, and the presentation of self are factors that contribute to the outcome of the final research project, so it is pertinent to try to address these issues early in the process. Regardless of the research experience,

no individual can walk into a prison for the first time fully prepared for what goes on inside. Prison is an environment that requires individuals to constantly adapt and change the ways they regard themselves and, subsequently, how they present themselves to others (Schlosser, 2008:1510).

This section will navigate the fieldwork with women in three prisons in Spain to analyze how the particularities of each case study affected the research process and the manner in which the researcher dealt with them. It will also explore how the positionality of the researcher influenced the data collection, the fieldwork routine and her own perceptions regarding the subject of study.

The inception of my fieldwork inside prisons

Power is an omnipresent element of the prison system. It is produced everywhere and by everyone by using different technologies. For this reason, the person or persons who accompany the researcher the first time that she or he enters a prison are quite relevant. The ways in which power and authority are embodied in hosts and entangled in the positionality of the researcher, as well as with others, play a key role in the future development of the research, although these relationships may be modified afterwards depending on other variables (Schlosser, 2008). However, when doing research inside prisons and other institutions of confinement, the researcher accepts a lack of control over the actual conditions of entrance. As a result, depending on her/his previous expertise and abilities, she will be able to reverse

or minimize some of the adverse consequences that emerge or simply try to navigate the environment as best as possible.

In this vein, the beginning of my fieldwork was quite different in each prison. As previously mentioned, one of the prisons was 350 km from my home and my fieldwork there was divided in two short visits. The aim of the first entrance was twofold: to visit the facility and have a first contact with the managers, and to interview some staff members and a few inmates. I wanted to interview prisoners to use their impressions and reactions to adjust certain aspects, such as the guidelines for the interviews. Considering particular constraints, and to take advantage of the short time spent in the *Jupiter* prison, I needed to have a well-organized schedule with little idle time. To do so, I was in close contact with one deputy head who was very efficient in preparing the week's itinerary. It is important to note that, with few exceptions, all the managers and staff of the prison truly believed in the Respect Modules program implemented in this prison that was the focus of my research. This belief was clearly reflected in the type of inmates selected for the first visit. Broadly speaking, the few participants interviewed (half of them were involved in the program analyzed, the other half was not) provided a very positive image of the prison and the program. They were very enthusiastic and proactive with regards to the ordinary dynamic of the facility and the activities offered. Compliance with prison rules and regulations may be interpreted differently in prison research, even as a form of resistance and surviving the prison environment (Bosworth, 1999; Carrabine, 2006; Carrabine; Bosworth, 2001; McCorkel, 1998; Rowe, 2011). So, even if the inmates agreed to take part in an interview and signed an informed consent form, the manner in which the prison procedure recruited them to take part in the research created a continuity of sorts between the researcher and the institution in the production of penal power. As a technology of power, the process of recruiting inmates to participate in the study made me a component of this artifice. Consequently, for the organization of my subsequent visit, I reminded managers of the importance that participation in the

interviews be voluntary, and of explaining the research goal and my independence from the institution. I reiterated these messages during my second visit, and emphasized that nothing that happens or is said during the interview would be shared with the institution and that all the information would remain anonymous, although the change in the person in charge of organizing the subsequent visit, along with the workload and other issues, complicated overcoming some of these initial difficulties.

The entry dynamics at the other two prisons were different. During my first visit to the women-only *Athenea* prison, the manager showed me the facility before I interviewed him, but there were neither introductions to nor conversations with the people we met. We agreed that the social educator would inform the women about my research and invite them to participate. On my first day in the prison, a guard had a list of inmates who had volunteered to participate. This initial list of volunteers included prisoners normally quite committed to the module, proactive, and prone to collaborate in any activity offered. In these interviews, I emphasized the fact that their participation was voluntary, anonymous and would have no impact on potential benefits, because I was an academic and independent from the institution.) The informed consent included this information but, during the course of the interviews, I repeated these messages several times. However, after my first visit and initial impressions, I decided to change my behavior to try to break the verticality of the relationship, in keeping with my feminist approach (Gelsthorpe, 1990; Flavin, 2001; Renzetti, 2013). The use of the prison apparatus to select inmates for the study, which was requested to disseminate basic information about the research, did not play a positive role in the recruitment of participants. Although less intensively than in the case of the *Jupiter* prison, the fact that the prison administration intermediated my relationship with the prisoners placed me close to the institution, projecting similar attributes, which was not beneficial to my research goals.

The situation in the third case, at *King* prison, was similar in the sense that I conducted a first meeting with the authorities to

share my goals and the main aspects of my plan for visits. Shortly afterwards, they put me in contact with the social educator and, after that, everything was even more flexible than at the *Athenea* prison. The first time I entered the women's department at King prison the social educator introduced me to the inmates, very broadly explained my research to them and left me in the department to begin the interviews. After that, I had no more contacts with professionals or managers. Regarding the guards, my contacts were limited to the moment of entrance and exit from the female department. In the first visit, I interviewed several women, but, unlike my perceptions at the other two prisons, I sensed a lower sense of obligation on their part to participate in the interviews. In this regard, it is important to note that the dynamic of this facility differed considerably from the other two, mainly because the prisoner status in this module was unstable. Approximately 25 inmates were permanently held in the department, while the rest were there for a short period of time, awaiting either transfer to another prison or trial. Hence, some of them had neither feelings of belonging to the specific context or contact with guards and staff. Additionally, only a few of them saw me on the day I was introduced and even the prison officers working in the women's department treated me completely as an outsider. Thanks to the particularities of how I entered the prison and the dynamic of this department, the position that I occupied in the continuum prison-prisoners was the furthest from the institution, in comparison with the other prisons.

Crossing prison walls

Since the 1990s in Spain prisons share not only architectural design, but also use similar security and control systems, which consist of several locations with prison guards behind gates and counters (see also Corazza, 2017). Two of the three prisons (the *Jupiter* prison and *King* prison) were constructed with this model. Additionally, the researcher receives a card labeled "visitor" that had to be visible during the time inside the prison walls. Hence, at

the main entrance, I had to show my ID to a prison officer and / or to the military police (Spanish Civil Guard) and to explain the goals of my visit. I then had to go through other counters and gates to be identified again and registered. All of these checkpoints (Jenegathan, 2004, 2018) establish boundaries and create a border that separates dangerous groups from good citizens, serving as components of security apparatuses (Foucault, 2008). The ID creates the opportunity to cross the different checkpoints while the “visitor” card takes the form of a protection that keeps the holder within the group of good citizens although inside a prison.

Drawing on my experience entering penal institutions in Spain, I must differentiate *Jupiter* prison from the others. The main particularity concerned the fact that my visits to *Jupiter* prison were time-intensive, meaning that I had to enter and leave the prison twice a day on several consecutive days. Due to staff shifts in the mornings and afternoons, the entrance process was very stressful and frustrating. Each day I had to identify myself several times, justify the visit, defend the carrying of my permitted recorder, and explain that I had permission to visit the female department unsupervised.

I faced similar difficulties in *King* prison. During my first visit, the guard had several folders on the desk, and my authorization was in the last one, so I had to wait quite a long time before the guard was able to find it. From that point on, I always informed the staff that my authorization was one of the last pages in the last folder. Nearly every time, they completely ignored me and looked through all pages of the folders until arriving where my authorization had been archived. In this particular case, because of my schedule, I had a week between each visit to forget my anger and frustration, which was impossible at the *Jupiter* prison because of the intensive character of my visits and the lack of time to channel and process these disturbing feelings. For me, these attitudes clearly represent a demonstration of penal power. I was neither a prisoner nor a visitor; to the contrary, I found myself in a sort of limbo in my role as an independent researcher. Thus, these expressions of “micropower” distanced me from the institution and

placed me on the side of powerless groups. In the *Athenea* prison, conversely, the attitude of the staff at gates, the implementation of regulations and the level of control was much more manageable despite the presence of security systems, checkpoints and rules. Additionally, the architecture and space at that prison made for a less oppressive environment, which helped me to cope more easily with all of these obstacles. The contrast between this prison and the other two clearly shows how gender and prison interact in the construction of subjectivities. As previously indicated, *Athenea* was a women-only prison with a distinctive architecture, while the other two were macro-prisons with a majority of male prisoners. Male prisoners are traditionally constructed as dangerous and violent in comparison with women prisoners who are more commonly characterized as victims and vulnerable (Padovani, 2017; Ballesteros-Pena, 2018). So, the rituals of the institution tend to reproduce these images in the way the security apparatuses work when a woman researcher attempts to enter a prison.

Additionally, the different checkpoints encountered in the entrance process serve as productive powers that symbolize the dominant position of the institution in relation to a woman researcher. The production of gender shown in the way that the prison power (masculine) and the researcher (feminine) interact illustrates the interactions of different variables in the construction of penal power.

However, in spite of these barriers, it was inevitable that I also perceived myself as a privileged visitor. At the main door, I sometimes arrived along with other visitors, relatives and friends of prisoners, and in comparison with them, I felt a difference because of my role as a researcher. In the end, this status, and my “visitor” card, allowed me to enter and move around different areas of the prison and avoid invasive body searches before entering the premises. At these moments, I clearly perceived the distance between myself and the other visitors, noting nuances in the guards’ attitudes, in their tone of voice and in how they spoke. Once again, even when power is not something absolute,

hierarchy reminds us who are the dominant and privileged groups, and who are not (McCorkell; Myers, 2003).

Contacts with prisoners and performance of interviews

Some of the aspects pointed out regarding the first visit to each prison and the security systems evolved or revealed their impacts during the course of the interviews. In this vein, my first visit to *Jupiter* prison was a preamble to the second part of the fieldwork. In theory, the inmates had been informed about my research and had agreed to participate voluntarily. But I did not have the chance to talk more informally with them to try to perceive or check other elements not directly mentioned in our conversations.

For instance, I emphasized the importance of informing potential participants about the voluntary nature of their involvement in the research. However, during some interviews, I discovered that the participants were unaware of either the purpose of our meeting or their freedom of participation. When I became aware of these omissions, I carefully reiterated the voluntary nature of their participation and the absence of any impact – either negative or positive. I also pointed out that information provided would be anonymous and confidential (Jewkes, 2011; Calderón, 2018). Despite these instructions, some interviews were difficult. On the one hand, when I discovered that the participants had not received important information about the interviews, I felt upset and sad. Every time it happened, I had to make a great effort to suppress these emotions and continue the interview as best I could. On the other hand, the attitude of a participant sitting across from me and being asked about her daily life in prison while she was not completely sure about the implication of her words, regardless of my explanations about my independence, also impacted me. As a result, some interviews were uncomfortable, short and useless, as I wrote in my field notes at the time.

Today the two interviews (the second and third of the morning) were quite difficult. I had to extract the information in very small doses... They were very hermetic. Also, because some of them didn't know the purpose of the interview. They felt distrust and fear. I think some of them speak positively (or at least not negatively) about the department because they fear retaliations, a detrimental situation. Anyway, the information provided is useful, because it expresses things: silences, half-smiles... (...).

For other inmates, a shift occurred as the conversation continued. The person would begin to feel more confident, she double-checked the anonymity of the information provided and began to speak more openly about her daily life, giving a more nuanced vision of her experience.

Other times, I was aware that the person was not relaxed, even though the interview had been completed. Some inmates showed mistrust when answering but, from my point of view, they wanted to do the interview due to a sense of obligation to participate. When this occurred, I changed the content of the interview slightly, asking about less sensitive issues, and I tried to shorten the interview to allow people to return to their activities. On these occasions, even though I had been discursively produced as a component of the prison, I tried to reverse this image by distancing myself from the institution, which was not always successful because of the oppressive environment of the prison.

Conversely, the fieldwork in the other two prisons was quite different. In the *Athenea* prison, in which women from the department were encouraged to participate in the research, after my first visits the situation evolved to a more natural and informal routine. Instead of having to rely on institutional support to recruit participants and explain my research, I visited the departments and spent time talking to the women: sometimes they were sitting on a bench talking together, involved in an activity in the library, moving around the module to attend activities or waiting in a queue to buy something in the small supermarket ("*economato*"). At such moments, I initiated informal conversations, introducing

myself, presenting my research and inviting them to participate. At times I concluded interviews by suggesting that the inmate speak to others in an attempt to recruit more interviewees. I took advantage of specific moments to establish more stable relationships with some of them and find allies who could help me in the process.

The strategy followed was generally successful, although it required a constant proactive attitude of introducing, explaining the research and inviting them to participate. Not only is interrupting personal conversations between colleagues or friends occasionally somewhat disrupting, but trying to encourage their participation in an activity that would have no direct impact on them made me question their reasons for collaborating with me. One of my biggest concerns was to be alone in the office without anyone there to interview. Luckily, this was rare and I was able to talk with many women, by both conducting formal interviews, and through more informal chatting. Thus, the change of the strategy as well as the particularities of my fieldwork in these prisons helped me to modify the image deployed after my initial contacts with the institution.

On other occasions, my own prejudices towards some persons made me think about the interactions between my positionality and the diverse group of women I was in contact with during the fieldwork. This was the case of a lesbian gypsy woman, who adamantly refused to participate in the interview after I had introduced myself and my research. A week later, when I was in the office waiting for somebody to talk to, she came and told me that she had decided to participate and that her previous attitude stemmed from her own history, which she had difficulty remembering and explaining. This episode helped me to reflect on the constructions of my commonalities with her (which initially was limited to our social construction as women), my first reaction to her rude behavior (I felt like I did not want to interview her) and the opposite feelings that arose after the interview (McCorkel; Myers, 2003).

Space and other practical issues of interviews

As Downing, Polzer and Levan (2013) point out

it is almost indisputable that a major strength of qualitative sociological inquiry is its ability (...) to capture and understand the context in which its findings emerge. To be realized, these strengths require the investigator to pay close attention to not only what respondents have to say but also where, when, and under what circumstances they say it (Downing; Polzer; Levan, 2013:479).

Thus, space is an active participant in the research process and becomes even more prominent when research is conducted in a closed institution such as a prison (Mehta, 2014). Hence, along with the dialogue and the relationship with participants, the researcher has to consider space and time as perceived and constructed by both parties (Downing; Polzer; Levan, 2013).

In my fieldwork, space issues and other practical aspects were considered and reflected upon, although in this regard, I found more similarities than disparities between the three prisons. Although I had informal conversations in different places in the *Jupiter* and *Athenea* prisons, such as yards, collective rooms and even inmate cells, the formal interviews were normally conducted in a staff office (of the social educator, psychologist, etc.) and less frequently in a library or classroom. I was aware that share the space of prison professionals could complicate the situation. Even when I reiterated that I was not a psychologist or a prison staff member, it was at times impossible to completely avoid a certain level of confusion. As a result, although I had a list of topics to discuss according to my research goals, some conversations moved to other topics more connected with the concerns or feelings of inmates. As a feminist researcher, I was committed to respecting the conversational process, being flexible about the process and collecting the information shared regardless of its connection to my research. Inmates were offering me their time and energy and I had to at least show some kind of respect or

reciprocity. For me, this meant giving them the chance to talk freely even if the conversation took different paths from my research questions. However, apart from telling them who I was and was not, I also tried to temporarily break the conditions of the space. So, instead of conducting interviews from the other side of the table, a common practice by professionals, I always sat next to the interviewee. To a certain extent, this technique broke with the “therapeutic relationship” that they were used to with other staff members.

Conclusion

From a feminist criminology approach and other critical perspectives to prison ethnography, it is highly meaningful to break from traditional concepts of ‘scientific neutrality’ in which distance from participants, emotional detachment and objectivity are key features. Reflexivity has emerged as a conceptual tool that helps us to reflect on our own positions as researchers and the manner in which our inquiry is constructed with the rest of the participants and intertwined with a wide range of variables and subjective ideas. In recent times, and mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries, academic contributions reflecting on reflexivity, positionality and similar topics have gained more attention from researchers of prisons and other institutions of confinement. At the same time, feminist and postcolonial positions in social sciences have highlighted the power imbalances and difficulties involved in constructing an alternative approach to objectivity and giving voice to subjugated groups.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this debate by offering insights from countries outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition to provide more diversity to the field. I have analyzed the manner in which particularities of fieldwork in three women prisons in Spain, namely conditions of access, security controls, relationships with participants, architecture and time and space have influenced the research process. Every researcher or research team has a diversity of strategies, responses and attitudes when they face

constraints and obstacles while conducting prison research. Magical solutions to these problems do not exist but I understand that by sharing experiences and responses we may be able to learn from each other and strengthen the toolkits available to adequately and responsibly implement prison ethnography. Additionally, I argue that we need to recognize the role of emotions in prison research and the impact of our involvement in the complex realities we analyze. By doing so, we will contribute to the construction of social research as a genuinely humane activity engaged with social justice.

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