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'THERE'S A LOT IN THOSE KEYS ISN'T THERE?' THE EXPERIENCE OF A FEMALE RESEARCHER RESEARCHING RAPE IN A MALE PRISON UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCH AS A KEY HOLDER'

This paper highlights some broad epistemological issues surrounding the role of a female researcher working within a male sex offender prison, in England. It will highlight in particular some issues that arose from being given a set of keys to the prison, for the duration of the research project. The paper will examine the symbolism contained within the keys for the researcher, as well as the impact upon the researcher's sense of being an objective researcher. The paper will then conclude with an examination of what impact having a set of keys to the prison was perceived by the researcher to have affected the knowledge created from this project.

INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper is to explore particular aspects relating to the experience of being a female researcher, researching sex offenders. The context of this research was that I was a mature MSc[1] student embarking upon my first empirical research project in the setting of a male sex offender prison, in England. Moreover another issue, which is perhaps pivotal to the essence of this paper, relates to being allocated a set of keys to the prison, so that I was independent of prison escort staff, for the duration of the research project. Whilst being a female researcher within a prison setting is certainly not a new phenomenon (Campbell, 2002; Genders and Player, 1995; Liebling, 1992, 2001; Morris and Morris, 1963; Scully, 1991), however a researcher being allocated keys certainly could be considered to be unusual. Therefore this paper will highlight broad epistemological understandings of this experience, but in particular, this paper will focus upon my perceived symbolism attached to keys and the perceived impact upon my sense of objectivity within my research project. I will also contrast this with examples of other female prison researchers, who constructively decided against having a set of keys to a prison during their research.

The research referred to within this paper related to a project undertaken as part of an MSc I was engaged in during 2002, and it was my first piece of prison research. The concept of having my own set of keys meant more to me than just having access to many areas within the prison; it ultimately altered my perception of my 'self' within the research, as well impacting the construction of the knowledge created as a result of the research project. Before moving on to focus of the symbolic nature of having a set of prison keys, it is important to place into context the research project from which this paper is drawn.

THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

To date I have completed one prison research project, and I am currently beginning the second prison based research project, which is the focus of my PhD. The research

undertaken which forms the basis of this paper, constituted the research component of an MSc in Clinical Criminology, undertaken and completed at the University of Leicester in 2002. The focus of the research project related to the resettlement needs of sex offenders. The aim of the research was to determine which external structures, such as housing, employment and the rebuilding (if necessary) of family ties, that were in place, or required putting into place for the eventual release of sex offenders (Mills, 2002).

In order to conduct this research I had to negotiate access arrangements to the prison. Once that was approved, it was agreed that I would interview up to 20 men, on a one to one basis using qualitative interview techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interviews were divided into three areas of enquiry: Firstly, to establish their employment, family and offending histories prior to conviction; secondly, to establish their perception of the prison(s) they had encountered as part of their offending history. This examined their perceptions of how they considered they had settled within the prison community, and also whether they had utilised any of the educational and training programmes available to them whilst in prison. Thirdly the interview aimed to establish what arrangements, if any, were in place outside of prison, in terms of housing, employment, leisure activities[2], any strategies to facilitate offence avoidance,[3] and the often re-establishment of family ties (Ditchfield, 1994); all in readiness for their release. A compulsory component to residing in this particular prison was the requirement that all inmates would take part in Sex Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTP) (Beech, Fisher and Beckett, 1998). During the interviews it became clear to me that not all of the men I spoke to, had either completed or indeed began the treatment programmes, which was unusual because there was a prerequisite of participation on SOTP to residing in this prison.[4] It also became clear from some of the interviews that in the relatively few instances of non-participation in SOTP, there was naïve expectation on behalf of the participant that he would be able to go back to the same employment he had prior to his conviction, which in reality was unrealistic (Mills, 2002).[5]

The preparation for undertaking that research project, as with many other subjects of research, involved various steps of groundwork. Apart from the steps already mentioned I obviously undertook a comprehensive literature review into both the rehabilitation of sex offenders back into the community (Cobley, 2001; Worrall, 1997), and researching Sex Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTP) (Beech, Fisher & Beckett, 1998). In order to produce an unbiased research project, I had to learn to remove emotion from the interview (Campbell, 2002). It is widely accepted within the realms of research that for a research project to be 'done properly' (Letherby, 2000; Oakley, 1981) it is necessary to remain 'detached' and objective (Letherby 2000, p.94). This was especially relevant when undertaking face-to-face interviews, as it was imperative, according to my supervisor at the time that I remain as objective as possible, in order not to taint the data.[6] Therefore I had to learn how to detach myself from 'feeling' within the project (Campbell, 2002:15). I had no idea that this would be so difficult, as at times without realising it, the interview would suddenly change from a semi- structured interview, into a two-way conversation as the result of a comment or change in emphasis upon a word, made within the interview (Letherby, 2000; Mills, 2002). It was during these conversations, that I would view the participant in a different light, and thus realising how nuances in conversation can totally change the exchange of knowledge's in creation at that moment in time (Mills, 2002). It was only after I had completed the actual research, that I began to reflect back on the whole experience, and realise that due to the interaction between human beings in this context of research, the desirability to detach oneself from the research process is a practical impossibility as long as the brain allows thought and action to occur (Campbell, 2001; Letherby, 2000).

The impact that this research project had upon my sense of 'self'; my perceptions of my own personal objective status as an independent university student, was so overwhelming that I believe that there should be a record of it; other than the facts from within a piece of academic work required for the completion of a degree (also see Stanley, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Steier, 1991). Before moving on to discussing the main issues of this paper, I would like to outline the catalyst to writing this paper.

THE ORIGIN OF THIS PAPER

I am currently a 2nd year PhD student, funded by the European Social Research Council, researching the Social Construction of The Rapist and Rape[7] studying at the University of Sheffield, England. This is also a qualitative research project, aiming to interview up to 20 men within a sex offender prison in the Midlands area of England. Within this project I am substituting semi-structured interviews for life history interviews.

In preparing to undertake the pilot study of my PhD, both of my supervisors and I occasionally engaged in conversations surrounding my experience of having a set of keys during my MSc research. It was during one of these conversations that I informed my supervisors that one of the potential research sites[8] had raised the issue of me being able to carry a set of keys to the prison during my research. I had not attributed any real problems or difficulties to this concept, as clearly it would not be the first time I would find myself in this position, but my primary supervisor, a male and very experienced prison researcher with sex offenders in his own right, did. He was both alarmed and concerned about me having keys in the first instance, and was very articulate in explaining why he recommended that I did not take this course of action. He argued that one reason why I should reconsider having keys was that me being seen carrying keys by the prisoners could suggest that I was part of 'the system' (Morris and Morris, 1963; Scully, 1991; Genders and Player, 1995), which would also impact upon the perceived objectivity of my research, if not my data. Another, more important reason was in relation to my own personal safety (Morris and Morris 1963; Scully, 1991; Genders and Player, 1995). From my perspective, based on my previous research experience, I did not consider that I was in any danger and so did not fully appreciate my supervisor's concerns. Further, the idea of carrying keys in my PhD research was no big deal; I had done it before during my MSc research, and so I was very surprised at his reaction, and did not see any problems or issues that required change during my PhD. My second supervisor,[9] a female Professor whose specialist area is Gender studies, listened attentively to these discussions, and exclaimed her curiosity as to why the whole issue of the keys had been discussed so intensely a number of times. Ultimately, the catalyst to writing about my experience of having a set of keys, was a comment made by her during one of these discussions, that 'there is a lot wrapped up in those keys' (Hockey, 2004). Yes, there is a lot wrapped up in those keys, and I aim to explain as clearly as possible, exactly what the keys symbolised to me as a female researcher in a male prison setting. Further, I also aim to highlight how that experience has impacted upon the research methodology of my PhD research.

THE ALLOCATION OF KEYS

Once permission was given for me to undertake the research project, I met with the female Director of Resettlement, who was to act as my supervisor within the prison. This meeting discussed prison layout and areas that would be suitable for conducting interviews. During the meeting, I was given a tour of the prison, and potential inter-

view rooms were pointed out to me. This was useful, because I knew from the outset that there was no designated interview area that I could use, and there was always the possibility that a lot of my time in the prison would focus on finding a suitable place where to interview my participants.

It also transpired within this meeting that the prison was very short staffed, and in order for me to do this research, she would really like me to have keys; otherwise it would be very difficult for her to ensure that a prison officer would be able to escort me as and when necessary; even to take me to the toilet. I interpreted this last part of the sentence to mean that if I did not agree to have keys, then I would not be able to do the research. Therefore, as I did not want to jeopardise my opportunity of research, I accepted the offer of keys. At the same meeting, the Director of Resettlement mentioned that there were particular aspects of resettlement of sex offenders that I may wish to consider including in my research, and which would be interesting from the probation department's perspective to have researched. These included determining any opinions the prisoners had of the probation department, and what issues did the participants feel were best acted upon from the Probation Department, as well as any issues the prisoners considered were not best acted upon by the probation department. With these comments in mind, I returned to my university and drew up a detailed research proposal and interview schedule, which was subsequently submitted and accepted by the prison.

In order to attract volunteers to this project, I designed an information sheet, detailing my role as a student, the aims and objectives of the research, the confidentiality clause relevant to the interviews as well as detailing the kind of participants that I would like to speak to. Each form had an allotted space where anyone wishing to take part in the project could write their name and wing number on it. These were left in communal areas of the prison, as well as wing offices, which were frequently visited by inmates. As a result, only five men volunteered to take part in my research. Therefore I resorted to snowball sampling as well as selective sampling methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Of the five men, I asked each of them to ask if anyone on their wing would be interested in taking part. Also, I was given full access to the probation department's files on each prisoner under their supervision. From those files I contacted another 20 men. Overall I interviewed seventeen men; eleven of whom were convicted of sexual assaults against children, the remaining six were convicted of sexual assaults against adults.

THE PROCESS OF INITIATION OF A KEY HOLDER

In order to have keys, and be able to at least go to the toilet without an escort, I had to undergo security training. During this process it was made clear to me that there was an inherent vulnerability to being female, which could be heightened within the prison setting. Genders and Player (1995) highlighted that as with any research project, the researchers themselves contribute to the construction of the knowledge creating process (p.36). This could be through the age, gender, race of the researcher, and very pertinent for them, their status as young women researchers associated with Oxford University, England; the latter in its own right creating particular preconceptions surrounding their work in their prison. Indeed, within their research, their own vulnerability attached to their gender was exposed starkly by the uncovering of a plot to kidnap and sexually assault them both by an inmate (p.45). This was unearthed during a treatment programme group session, where the man described in detail his plans, as well as how those plans were thwarted. Juxtaposed to the reiteration of my vulnerability, was a kind of initiation process, in the form of stories told about particular prisoners, which were

designed to make me appreciate my feminine vulnerability in such a dangerous male environment (also see Cope, 2003), which reinforced an implicit dangerousness about the men I was about to interview (Mills, 2002).

At each point of the security training, my perceived vulnerability as a woman was often referred to whilst reiterating an element of responsibility of holding keys: For example, during my security training,[10] the male security officer said to me "…the prison is filled with men with no natural sexual outlet; be aware of that in how you dress; always try to appear businesslike and professional;[11] not feminine" (Mills, 2002). This annoyed me somewhat, as I interpreted the officer's words as implying that 'I' could be the trigger to explode sexual inactivity, which I considered unfair, and I seriously doubted whether a male researcher would be given the same advice (Cope, 2003), after all, not all the prisoners in the prison were heterosexual (Mills, 2002).

Frequently my gender raised issues of my own personal safety within the prison, each time this issue was raised by male prison officers, and always in the context that I was a potential hostage victim. This first occurred during my security training whilst instructing me on the technicalities of having a set of prison keys, even though when I challenged him to explain this statement, he admitted that in the 22 years that the prison had held sex offenders, only one female officer had ever been held hostage, and to his knowledge, a researcher had never been attacked, assaulted or held hostage (Mills, 2002). However, at no time during my project did I ever feel in any danger. Each time an interview was to take place, the wing officer (male) was always aware of my presence and location within the prison; that was a rule that I never deviated from. Upon being issued with my keys, I was also issued a personal attack alarm, and was instructed never to be afraid to use it, but I did not ever have a reason to; I always felt very safe within the prison, but I was placed under the strict advice of never entering the prison without having it attached to my key belt. Following the security training, all I had to do now was get used to the layout of the prison, which I did very quickly. Once I had familiarised myself, I embarked upon my project and the experience of holding keys.

THE KEYS – THE REFLEXIVE PICTURE

To my inexperienced and naïve 'self', being asked to consider being a key holder raised various aspects about my sense of 'self'. For example, I felt that the prison considered me sufficiently responsible, and competent to entrust me with a set of keys. Having keys also made me feel grown up, even though I was 41 years old! I also considered that having keys inferred a status within the prison. With regard to the latter I was certainly correct; my status was perceived to be different to different people, which I shall explore later. That said however, I have no doubt whatsoever that if either the Governor or the Director of Resettlement had considered me irresponsible or incompetent I would not have been able to do the research at all; and the issue of keys would never have arose, so my sense of responsibility and competence were deserved.

My eagerness to take on this research, coupled with inexperience and naivety, ultimately led to a failure on my part to critically assess the symbolism of having keys; both on my 'self' and on those that I interviewed. I had of course read numerous academic texts relating to research methods; in particular prison methodologies, (Genders and Player, 1995; King & Wincup, 2000; Liebling, 1992; Morris and Morris, 1963; Scully, 1991), and without exception each text referred to issues of objectivity (relating to both the researcher and the project), as well as issues surrounding the personal safety of the researcher. However due my naïve and inexperienced 'self'

having a sense of invincibility, I did not consider the seriousness of my decision to have keys.

'THERE'S A LOT WRAPPED UP IN THOSE KEYS'

The privilege of having keys to the prison meant various things to me: freedom, invisibility, independence and objectivity. Having my own set of keys inevitably meant that I was free to move around the prison unencumbered by prison officer escorts, in order to carry out my research project. My 'self' imagined this freedom of movement had brought with it an imagery cloak of invisibility, which meant that I would not draw attention of the staff towards myself as moved through the prison. This invisibility brought with it a sense of independence. I felt that having a set of keys, and being able to move around freely would enhance my independent status as a university student, as opposed to a member of the prison staff. That independence, I was convinced, would enable me to produce a more objective, and robust piece of research. The word objective though for me meant two things: objective in the first instance referred to my objectivity as an independent researcher; and secondly, being an independent researcher Becker (1967) argued brought a greater chance of producing an unbiased and therefore objective piece of research. This definition of objective of course, refers to the so-called 'value free' research (p.:239) which is considered in research circles, to be unbiased and 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1991, p.142). All I had to do now was to conduct my research, from which hopefully I would uncover information that I could claim was new knowledge; objectively created.

From the very first interview, I was very keen to prove my independent status as a student, and not as someone associated with the prison itself. Therefore I included it in the project information sheets; the consent forms as well as reiterating this point at the beginning of the interviews. If any of my participants were ever in doubt of my status, then hopefully they would be reminded by an official university A4 folder carried at all times during my project. To my naïve 'self' these were my badges of independence which differentiated me from 'the prison system' (Cope, 2003, Genders and Player, 1995; Morris and Morris, 1963).

Due to the freedom of movement that I had, I was able to negotiate my own daily structure, subject to restrictions in place due to the prison regime, for example, lock-up times and meal times; work, educational and treatment programmes and so on. Therefore, the freedom, the independence (both definitions) and the invisibility were precursors to attaining objective research. From the very first day of being a key holder however, I became aware of a defect in my cloak of invisibility.

The symbolism attached to wearing prison keys with hindsight identified me as perhaps having sufficient authority within the prison that I was given my own set of keys. There is no doubt that whilst wearing the prison issue belt and keys, I felt different from the prisoners. Of course I am different in a number of ways to the prisoners; firstly I am not a prisoner and I am free to leave at the end of the day, but I am also a woman and I am not a sex offender. But the difference I refer to in this context relates to the element of the power differential experienced by carrying keys. For example, upon immediately leaving the Security Office, and unlocking the first gate I felt different and set apart from the inmates of this prison. As I walked through the corridors towards the probation department, where I was based, inmates approaching my direction greeted me as 'Miss'; the same title afforded to female prison officers, female probation department staff and female psychology department staff. [12] Immediately I was aware that as a new face in the prison, it was not unreasonable to expect to

be noticed (Scully, 1991), but I did not anticipate the impact upon my 'self' of being associated and ultimately assumed, as being part of the prison. I felt that my independent and objective status was immediately threatened, and decided that I must make my independent status even clearer to my participants; it was vital to me, in order to make the men feel at ease in the interview setting, that they knew I was not a member of the prison staff.

A further example that my invisible cloak had malfunctioned occurred during one of my interviews, quite early on in the project. The participant informed me that "… the lads have been discussing your project and that it's a good idea to help us find work; it's more than the prison does". It had not occurred to me that they would discuss being a participant in my research. After all, Diana Scully (1991) had discussed within her methodology of research, how the prisoners' demeanour outside of the interview setting, was not conducive to recognising that there had been any contact with her, due to outsider status (p.10). Earlier research, undertaken at HMP Pentonville, London in 1958 by Terence and Pauline Morris (published 1963) revealed again, how prisoners taking part in research were reluctant to acknowledge their part in it (pp.323-328). For the first time I had to accept that I could not be invisible within the prison, not least because I am a new face but that I am a woman, but I was also angry as I had not realised how naïve I had been on embarking on this project. On reflection, this participant had done me a favour in telling me about this, and I began to reflect on how I as a woman and a researcher could influence the project (Genders and Player, 1995, p.36).

However, if I had any doubts as to the effect of my gender upon the prisoners, this was clearly demonstrated to me during one hot summer afternoon during the research. Due to the discomfort in wearing trousers in hot weather, I decided that I would wear a skirt. Of course I had to keep in mind the nature of the establishment in which I was working, and remembering the comments of the security officer, relating to the appropriate type of dress code I should observe, my choice of below the knee black skirt, together with white blouse and black shoes was not considered inappropriate by me at all; it was business like attire (Genders and Player, 1995:43) On leaving the changing room, I entered a corridor lined on both sides by men dressed in their gym wear, who were waiting to be taken outside for their exercise period. There were approximately 60 men and instantly I felt intimidated because I knew there was no other route to my destination; the interview room. I just knew that I had to walk between them, but also knew that I could not exhibit my state of fear.

The reaction from the men was overwhelming and, if I am honest, very intimidating. Whilst I walked the gauntlet of shouting and laughing men, I was subjected to wolf whistles and sexual innuendo, but what struck me most was the noise they created, it was terrifying and frightened me more than their jibes. That was the only time I felt truly vulnerable, and I made a very quick route to the wing office, where I was met by three male officers of differing grades and ages, all displaying knowing smiles which clearly were saying that I shouldn't have worn the skirt! The lack of admonishment by the staff towards the prisoners in this regard shocked me, because I expected at least one of the officers to chastise the men in order to gain control of the situation, but also to establish some kind respect towards me. Up until this point, a very paternalistic attitude had been displayed towards me particularly from the older, longer serving male prison officers. The younger male prison officers did not display such an obvious paternal attitude, as much as they displayed their own perceived professional status. Therefore I think it is fair to say that the behaviour of the officers present in the wing office in that instant, reinforced stereotypical paternalistic attitudes often aimed towards women, and that for me to expect any other type of behaviour, was with the

benefit of hindsight unrealistic.[13] The failure on the officers to react in my favour to the prisoners' behaviour reinforced a canteen culture of sexual innuendo often experienced by women within male dominated institutions (see Cope, 2003). It was an experience that I did not wish to repeat, and therefore thereafter only wore trousers, but I do feel that I was being almost bullied into conforming to patriarchal attitudes in a way that only reinforces stereotypes about gender, and I was not happy about it at all (Genders and Player, 1995, p.43).

LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH

The concept of conducting research with real[14] sex offenders is a daunting prospect, but one which I was eager to undertake. The freedom of movement afforded to me by having keys, was a real privilege and it gave me a great insight into prison life. However in my view, I paid a high price for the privilege of carrying keys. Part of that price related to the inclusion of particular issues of research that were favoured by the probation department in relation to resettlement of sex offenders. I realised during the research that it was an almost unsaid cost of being given access to the prison, that the probation department would be depicted favourably. Another cost relates to my perception of independence. The adoption of particular areas of research into my project watered down my sense of being independent. At the beginning of the project, a paramount objective of mine was to be viewed as independent of the prison. By taking on probation department advice about areas of research they were interested in, I ultimately reduced my ability to be independent and unwittingly I consider that I became a prison researcher; part of the prison. To reinforce that role, when I wore my prison belt, with its keys and personal attack alarm, I was highlighting the fact. Being a key holder to a prison demonstrates clearly the power differential between those with keys and those without. But power comes in many forms, and not least in the sense that the participants in my research had the power to tell me whatever they wished to in answer to my questions. In contrast though I ultimately have power over what is finally included or excluded from my research.

Throughout this research project, I was very aware that I was an 'outsider within' (Cope, 2003; Harding, 1991:13), and that I had to earn the trust of both staff and inmates within the prison (Genders and Player, 1995; Scully, 1991). I also had to prove to the prison, the prisoners and to myself that my research and its methodology, was both robust (Smaling, 1995) and objective (Maso, 1995). With hindsight it is easy to see that these were ideals to which I attempted to adhere, but as I have already outlined, weakened in reality before the interviews had begun, by effectively colluding with the probation department in my research aims. At the time of this research it did not occur to me that questions about whose side I was on would be raised (Becker, 1971; Liebling, 2001), I just wanted to do my research. This was an example of the extreme naivety I displayed at this point, and despite all that I have said, if I had to make a decision as to whether or not I did position myself on someone's side, then I would assert that I was on the side of knowledge creation, as this was the ultimate desire in conducting this research.

CONCLUSIONS

Would I hold keys again? No, I would not. Why? Because I do not want to be invisible. With reflection I realised that the invisibility I craved so much had more attachment about who I perceived I was as a person, and symbolised how I felt about myself at the time, more than anything else. I also do not want my research to be invisible – I want as

many people to come into contact with it as possible. I want to be seen and perceived as an independent researcher, which is what I am; I am an independent woman, embarking upon independently proposed research; this was my research.

The experience of having keys has impacted upon my PhD research project. When I begin my interviews I will not hold keys. As my primary supervisor advised me when discussing this issue "if the prison want you to do the research, then it is their responsibility to ensure your safety, and to escort you around the prison" (Cowburn, 2004).

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ENDNOTES

1 Master of Science degree (UK)

2 Their leisure activities could be restricted as part of their probation conditions

3 Offence avoidance strategies would have been practiced as part of SOTP.

4 The reasons for non-participation in SOTP include having a poor standard of English; the maintenance of denial in regard to responsibility for the offence, or insufficient places available on the desired programme.

5 It is often difficult for sex offenders upon release to revert to previously held positions of employment. It will depend on the type of employment also. Any restrictions on employment type will be explained to the offender prior to his release, and he will be monitored closely upon his release through the National Probation Service (NPS)

6 June 2002, supervision with Dr. Tina Skinner, The Scarman Centre, University of Leicester, England

7 This is the current working title of my thesis, but is subject to change

8 In the early stages of my PhD I was considering dividing my interview subjects from three separate prisons

9 For the purposes of creating a balance of supervision within my PhD I have been allocated a man and a woman who have equal status and responsibility of supervision

10 Which consisted of one meeting with the Senior Security Officer, a male prison officer whose role it was to ensure everyone within the prison was instructed in safety and security measures

11 Inferring that to appear businesslike/professional belied a kind of androgyny, which would increase my safety and lessen some kind of attack

12 Male officers were invariably referred to by Mr, followed by their surname

13 I also had to raise the question to myself that in expecting some kind of support from the male prison officers, I was willing to accept an element of patriarchal attitudes themselves. I had to acknowledge that in this kind of situation, I could not have it both ways.

14 As opposed to the monsters created within the media (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001)

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