A Difference That Makes a Difference? Reflexivity and Researcher Effects in an All-Foreign Prison

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Abstract
Today, researchers are expected to spend considerable energy describing and discussing their own social positions and personas in the field for at least two reasons: First, researchers always observe the field from a specific point of view. Their perspective is structured by their own social position and biography and is thus unique. Second, the people in the field react differently to the presence of different researchers. The field persona of the researcher is expected to impact the data she or he is able to produce. For these reasons, critically discussing one’s own field experiences is seen as an important part of the qualitative research process. This article will discuss the second part of this argument. Based on the experiences of two different researchers in the same field site, we ask whether it is true that different researchers necessarily produce different data. We conclude that in this case, at least, the differences between the two researchers did not seem to make much of a difference.

Keywords
reflexivity, researcher field persona, researcher effects, self-positioning, prison ethnography

What is already known?
Following the reflexive turn, the researcher herself or himself is seen as the single most important research instrument within a qualitative research paradigm. The researcher’s performance of self is said to impact both the way she or he observes and understands the field and the ways in which the field reacts to the presence of the researcher. The construction of one’s field persona is thus seen as a fundamental part of the data production process.

What this paper adds?
After reflecting on and discussing our separate findings from two different research projects conducted in the same field site, we are not all that certain that the substantial differences between our field personas mattered much at all in this case. Based on our different field experiences, we would like to start a discussion about the need for and the limits of a reflexive social science approach.

Introduction
The idea for this article emerged over a cup of coffee, on a terrace overlooking Oslo prison. We had just attended an information meeting with a group of Romanian nationals serving time there. During the meeting, Dorina Damsa was consistently confused to be Thomas Ugelvik’s secretary, translator, or student. Prisoners frequently made eye contact with Thomas, even though most of the conversation took place in Romanian, a language he does not understand. Thomas was assumed to hold some sort of power to help prisoners or at least influence their situation, while Dorina was relegated to a marginal supportive role. Reflecting on these observations, we became curious about each other’s experiences in the field. We expected that they differed considerably, in light of our gender, age, nationality, or perceived expertise, for instance, and wondered how this might end up affecting our construction of the data. This article is based on this curiosity. We ask whether the differences between our field personas actually made a difference in the research process and use our own experiences to explore the...
need for and the limits of a reflexive social science approach. This, then, is not a traditional research article where we report substantial findings from a study. The point, rather, is to start a discussion about reflexivity and positionality based on our different experiences in the same field site.

Ethnographic research can be described as a process where a researcher—often one researcher working alone—goes out into the world (the “field”) and interacts with the people she or he meets there (traditionally called “informants”). The researcher then retreats from the field at some point and returns to her or his office to reflect on the field experiences (“analyzing” the “data”) and write the research up, preferably as a publishable text. In most cases, the researcher starts out as a stranger in the field, different in important ways from the people who are at home there. The many differences between the researcher and the researched are often seen as vital for data production (indeed, researchers are often warned against “going native”). These differences are not only the basis for numerous conversations in the field; they are seen as coconstitutive of the researcher’s field optics or gaze (meaning, simply, that differences are very easy to spot). According to Coffey (1999), fieldwork should be recast as a process where the self is central. Fieldwork negotiations of self may impact on how the researcher is viewed by the people in the field and therefore on how these people react to her or his presence. As maintained by Goffman (1959, p. 22), the presence of another (an “observer”) influences the social performance of self; as we take on “roles” according to “fronts” (for instance, settings, gestures, appearances, demeanor), along specific social scripts. The performance of self is said to impact both the way the researcher observes and understands the field, and how the field reacts to the presence of the researcher (Ezzy, 2010), and is thus seen as a fundamental part of the data production process.

For these reasons, researchers today are expected to describe their social position in the field and discuss the ways it may have impacted on the data. This discussion is seen as a reflexive social science virtue and a vital part of the validation of qualitative research (Kumsa et al., 2015). Readers need to get a certain level of insight into the research process and the researcher’s field experiences to assess the strength of her or his claims (Reinharz, 2011). A successful ethnographer therefore has to include self-observation and self-reflection in her or his skill set. Following the reflexive turn (Foley, 2002), every research article needs to address the researcher’s positionality and the way her or his identity and perspective played out in the field, in relation to others, and within existing culture and power structures (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Madison, 2012).

There is a risk, however, that one might overdo it. Jewkes (2014) cautions researchers against crossing the line between honest disclosure and showy exposure. Constructive self-awareness and narcissistic self-absorption are related phenomena, but the latter should clearly be avoided. The important question, then, is how we might tell the difference. If we agree that in ethnographic research, the researcher, herself or himself, is the most important research instrument (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Liebling, 1999; Van Maanen, 1988), but we still think that social research needs to prioritize substantial findings over self-reflection, how do we in practice strike the right balance between not including enough tales of the field on the one hand and unnecessary navel-gazing on the other?

In this article, we want to discuss this dilemma based on our experiences as two different researchers in the same field site. Dorina—a young woman of Romanian origin—and Thomas—a slightly older Norwegian man—both conducted fieldwork in Kongsvinger prison, Norway’s only prison designed to hold foreign national prisoners exclusively. Because we are two different people, our fieldwork experiences in the same field site and the resulting data provide an opportunity to discuss the role of reflexivity and subjectivity in field research in a deeper and more meaningful way than what is possible in most single-researcher projects. We are both different in significant ways from the prisoners we met and interacted with, but we are also different from each other and have conducted our two different research projects at different times, meaning that we, presumably, impacted the field and the data production processes in different ways. Instead of the standard bipolar relationship between researcher and researched (A and B are different), this constellation creates a more complex triangular relationship of differences (A and B are both different from C, but they are also different from each other) making a more complex discussion possible. Perhaps controversially, we conclude that in our case the differences between researchers did not seem to have mattered much. While we did experience the field differently, when we later compared our data, the degree of similarity, not difference, is what struck us. At least in our case, different researchers ended up producing very similar substantial findings. We think this result is interesting because it went contrary to our expectations. We argue that our colleagues should not simply take researcher field effects in ethnographic studies for granted in future research.

**Reflexive Social Science**

At the end of the 19th century, the British Society for the Advancement of Science published their *Notes and Queries in Anthropology for the Use of Travelers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands* (1874). This pocket guide detailed themes and questions for data collection in the colonial context. The purpose was to collect “facts” about the primitive peoples being studied in an “objective” manner (Erickson, 2011). This paradigm, described variously as positivism or naturalism, would come to dominate the social sciences in the late 19th century and early 20th century, and would not really be challenged until the “interpretive turn” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987) of the mid- and late 20th century questioned the tenets of positivism.

Following the break with (the strong version of) positivism in most main streams of ethnography, postpositivist and postmodern approaches have held that experience is subjective, that ethnographic data may contain many different truths, and that social inquiry as a result inevitably is value laden and situated. While acknowledging the impossibility of objectivity, researchers were still motivated to get “better data” and “better
evidence” (Erickson, 2011) and began to focus explicitly on the research process itself (Denzin, 1970; Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The “reflexive turn” was already taking shape (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Autoethnographic accounts explored the researcher self (or selves) and revealed the messiness of the field; the difficulties, dilemmas, and emotions that shape ethnographic data. Feminist researchers pointed to the asymmetry of power between the “observer” and the “observed” and the need for reflexivity regarding the observer’s standpoint, which were seen as (at least partially) mutually constructed in interactions with the observed (Harding, 1991). Critical voices emphasized the impossibility of neutrality in social research and made the case for action oriented research as a way to address injustice (Thomas, 1993). Postmodern ethnographers went on to even challenge the authority and legitimacy of scholarly work itself and sought to extend reflexivity and commitment to those under study (Krieger, 1983).

Where does social inquiry stand today? According to the ethnographic methodological canon, the production of knowledge is situated, embodied, and relational (Coffey, 1999; Davies, 1999). The researcher self is seen as an integral part of the construction of the field; the medium through which the data can emerge as a “thing” that can be analyzed. As a consequence, the researcher’s position or field persona will impact her or his on-going self-positioning work in the field and the ways in which she or he is positioned by others (Jewkes, 2014). From this perspective, data are not simply collected, analyzed, and presented but collectively produced or constructed. This process is never straightforward. According to Vanderbeck (2005, p. 388), “relationships between the researcher and the researched are always entangled with systems of social power based on gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, and other factors.” These systems produce differences that are assumed to make a difference. The need to unpack these mutual entanglements and reflect on their consequences is seen as vital within a reflexive social science paradigm. As active participants in the field, researchers are supposed to acknowledge and reflexively discuss their positions and roles in the field, and the impact they themselves may have had on the resulting data material. Gibbs (1988), for instance, proposes a “reflective circle” to systematically structure the process of (self-) analysis in interactions in the field.

The paragraphs where researchers discuss their own field experiences are not just there, then, to add context and flavor to the final text. Disclosing and discussing the process where data have been impacted by the scholar’s social position within the study field are seen as vital. This is no easy endeavor, however. The field does not present the ethnographer with laboratory-like conditions, where field positionality can be straightforwardly tested for impact. As a result, the researcher’s social position or persona is normally quite briefly and speculatively addressed in articles. Sometimes, though, opportunities for a more thorough examination may arise, such as in our case. Having conducted our research projects in the same research site shortly one after the other, we have subsequently engaged in a dialogue that has allowed us to reflect on our own positions in the field, our constructions of the field, and the consequences for our data. This article, then, details how two different researchers, Dorina and Thomas, working on two different research projects in the same field site, constructed and were constructed by the research field, and whether these processes impacted their findings.

Method

Kongsvinger prison, an all-foreign prison about an hour and thirty minutes’ drive northeast of Norway’s capital city of Oslo, was the field site for both projects. Thomas did 4 months of fieldwork in the prison in the autumn and winter of 2013 as part of a multicited ethnographic study. He was an experienced prison researcher going into the project with multiple shorter and one long-term fieldwork periods under his belt. As in earlier projects, he drew keys and moved around the prison on his own accord. He did the fieldwork by himself. Data collection ended before he ever met Dorina.

Dorina entered Kongsvinger for the first time in the summer of 2015 to investigate Romanian prisoners’ transitions from Norwegian prisons to freedom as part of cooperation between the University of Oslo and the University of Bucharest. She visited the prison on numerous short-term research visits over the course of 2015 and 2016, collecting interview data, but also doing participant observation. Thomas was also a part of this project—in fact, he was the national project leader that had hired Dorina to do the job—but fieldwork was conducted by Dorina only.

The idea in this article is to compare the experiences of two different researchers who did two different projects in Kongsvinger prison more or less independently of each other. This might look deceptively like an experiment, and we must rush to stress that it is not. In particular, Thomas probably impacted on Dorina’s field experiences in ways that would ruin an experimental design in the natural sciences sense. During her project, feeling like a novice, Dorina shared experiences, ethical dilemmas, and findings with Thomas, prison research being new to her. We were also part of the same research environment at the University of Oslo throughout our two projects. This might explain that our findings ended up being so similar: Our researcher optics may have both been structured by the same departmental culture and the available discourses there. We acknowledge, then, that what we have done is not an experiment, but we still believe that our conversations have made it possible to reflect on researcher reflexivity and positionality in a way that would be difficult for a single researcher working alone.

In the Field

Although our two projects were slightly different, we both sought to understand the life of foreign nationals imprisoned at Kongsvinger prison through fieldwork. In the following, we will first address our positions in the field, before we turn to the construction of the data.
Who are we on the face of it? To begin with the similarities, we are White, middle-class, cisgender heterosexuals with strong support networks. We both use humor to cope with the challenges of the field experience and generally think of prison fieldwork as bittersweet, often interesting and funny and sometimes difficult and tragic. Then, there are the differences. Dorina identifies as female and Thomas as male. Dorina is younger and physically smaller than Thomas. Thomas is a Norwegian national while Dorina is Romanian. As a trained criminologist, Thomas has a professional skepticism toward the prison estate and its ability to reach its ambitious goals (the Norwegian Correctional Service’s most fundamental goal is to create a “safer society”). Nevertheless, as most Norwegians, he also, by and large, trusts the Norwegian government and sees great advantages of the current welfare state regime. As an immigrant to Norway, Dorina does not yet feel totally included in the embrace of the Norwegian welfare state. Her Romanian background gives her a more deep-seated distrust of the benevolence of state institutions.

There are also similarities between the ways we approached the field. We were both mindful of the need to actively cultivate rapport. We both strive to be sympathetic and active listeners, and we both sought to maintain awareness of the status differences (power, privilege, and perspective) between us and the other actors in the field. As a rule, we tried to adopt a nonjudgmental stance even when faced with informants who talked about deeply problematic and from our perspectives morally wrong actions. We might both be guilty of showing signs of understanding that may have been wrongly interpreted as agreement. This has created moments of discomfort but may have resulted in a better understanding of the other actors and their motivations. Other than that, we both consciously and actively engaged in the light banter characteristic of prison spaces, largely avoided taking notes during interactions as to minimize distance, and we both took mental notes of data we thought we ought to use later, in a fluid process of interaction and interpretation.

Then, there are differences. For Thomas, arriving at Kongsvinger prison for the first time felt like coming home, especially in light of his recent experiences of doing fieldwork in a police immigration detention center. At Kongsvinger prison, he was back in a social environment where he felt at ease, he knew the codes, knew how to approach people and make them comfortable. Conversely, Dorina walked into Kongsvinger prison carrying the weight of the anxiety and excitement of a first-time prison researcher on her shoulders. She invested significant mental and emotional energy in building relationships, experienced every moment as a learning moment, and generally felt under the pressure to perform. She remembers those first days as exhausting.

Thomas had a more permanent and stable presence in the prison than Dorina. Because he drew keys and carried an assault alarm on his belt, he was allowed to move around as he pleased between the various spaces of the institution. A native Norwegian speaker, he quickly established positive relationships with prison officers. His research project was perceived as ultimately beneficial to the prison, so officers, in a sense, felt that they had a stake in it. Building rapport with prisoners, however, was more difficult than he was used to from other prison field sites. Given that Kongsvinger prison is an all-foreign prison, the language barrier meant that, even when prisoner and researcher shared the best of intentions, conversations could be halting and frustrating. At 36, he was at the time only slightly older than the average for Norwegian prisoners. As a man, he shared the same gender identity as the prisoners (Kongsvinger prison is a men’s prison) and the majority of officers, although the Norwegian prison system has a higher proportion of female prison officers than most jurisdictions. He soon felt very Norwegian, however, in contrast to prisoners who have been selected for transfer to Kongsvinger prison based on the fact that they were not.

Unlike Thomas, Dorina had more irregular visits to the prison to interview specific prisoners. She was therefore not given keys, but was instructed to always stay “within sight” of an officer, to have her “safety ensured.” This limited her independent movement to the small area around the officers’ office. She had to be escorted by an officer when moving between different spaces, and she often felt like she was an additional task for the officers. The fact that she did not draw keys meant that she had to obey the officers and do as she was told much like the prisoners themselves. Not yet fluent in Norwegian, she spoke English to officers, which substantially limited communication. Her project was understood to have some relation to the Romanian prisoners and Romania and was thus seen as somewhat disconnected from the prison staff. As a consequence, Dorina could not really establish a sense of fellowship with the officers, though in time, relationships evolved (from being called “the researcher,” after about 6 months she was called by her name). Building rapport with the prisoners, however, came effortlessly. A shared language and an understanding of cultural codes created a sense of instant community. Showing no visible signs of fellowship with the officers and being bound by rules much in the same way as prisoners cemented that feeling.

Dorina and Thomas were different from the prisoners in several ways; their class background, their reason for being in the prison, and the fact that they could leave at any time perhaps being the most obvious. But Dorina and Thomas are also different from each other. In some aspects, they are both more similar to the prisoners than to each other. Most obviously, Thomas is a man (similar), but he is Norwegian (different). Dorina is a foreigner (similar), but she is a woman (different). The question is in what ways these differences made a difference. How did our similar and different ways of being in the field impact our data?

Differences That Made a Difference?

In the field, one might encounter different perceptions and performances of identity, which may have a strong impact on rapport. Perhaps not surprisingly, our differences, and particularly our different positions at the intersection of citizenship,
age, and gender, resulted in fairly different positions at Kongs-vinger prison. We were co-opted differently by the prisoner and officer tribes, and we established rapport with different participants in the field. In the following and for the purpose of our analysis in this article, we will look at specific aspects of our field personas. This split is of course entirely artificial. In the real social world, these aspects are always intersectionally entangled.

Citizenship/language. According to research, the most common and significant problem reported by foreign national prisoners in general is the lack of knowledge of the national language (Bhui, 2008; Kalmthout, Hofstee-van der Meulen, & Dünnel, 2007). In many cases, both verbal and written communication are severely hampered. This may again lead to feelings of social isolation, uncertainty, and helplessness. A lack of understanding of the native language will color every part of the everyday prison experience. Prisoners are frustrated at not being understood by staff, of having little to read in their own language and no television channels, and at missing out on basic provisions because they had not understood instructions. At Kongs-vinger, there is a great variety of language back-grounds among prisoners. A shared language can create an important sense of common ground. In the case of relatively small languages, such as Norwegian or Romanian, language skills can temporarily tie strangers together.

For Dorina, being Romanian and speaking Romanian were probably the single most important factor in successfully estab-lishing relationships with prisoners. Language was like a uni-versal passkey; most Romanian prisoners automatically assumed her to be on their side, to understand what it is like to be Romanian, and to be a Romanian in Norway more spe-cifically. Dorina’s origin and native language made it very easy for participants to relate to her. As a Romanian, she was expected to understand and empathize with the participants’ lifestyle, as she was supposed to understand the state of poverty of so many Romanians and their lack of options to make ends meet: “you know how it’s like in Romania”; “you know the hardship” and “you have no choice” but to leave the country and ultimately participate in criminal activities.

Moreover, with an understanding of French and Italian, Dorina was also able to communicate with other prisoners. She soon became an informal messenger or translator in the communication between foreign national prisoners and Norwegian prison officers. Common languages allowed Dorina to be seen as an honorary member of the prisoner tribe almost instantly. Davies (2015) describes how he due to his background as a former prisoner was seen as closer to the prisoners’ status rather than being seen as a member of “the establishment.” His ex-prisoner status created an instant connection. In the case of Dorina, a shared minority language had similar effects. When she greeted prisoners in Romanian, she was immediately assumed to have knowledge and share similar views of same-ness or otherness with the Romanian prisoners. Often, the shared language created a shared space, as one participant commented, a respite from the “day in, day out” of prison life.

Thomas, on the other hand, had to resort to English (and in a few cases Norwegian) in his communication with prisoners. As a result, he experienced much more of a distance that needed to be overcome initially. In most cases, English is the necessary common ground language that makes communication between prisoners and officers at least haltingly possible. Being Norwe-gian and speaking English marked him from the outset as an outsider to the prisoner community, and perhaps to some as someone who might be aligned with the prison or the Norwe-gian government in some way, despite his attempts at being seen as an independent researcher. He did manage to create a few extended relationships with individual key informants among the prisoners of the kind that he had depended on in previous research projects in prisons, but he had to work a lot harder to get there than Dorina did. Predictably, Thomas ended up spending most of his time talking with prisoners who knew at least a fair bit of English. Similarly, the prisoners who had spent a lot of time in Norway were easy to get to know and get along with for Thomas. A few times, he experienced a bit of the frustration reported by prisoners when he was approached by prisoners who had heard about his project and that believed that they had something important to tell him, but where the lack of a common language made data collection almost impossible. At other times, he was seen as a Norwegian exception; someone who could become a valuable ally or even advocate and someone who could finally relay the truth about the Norwegian system to the gullible but basically good-hearted Norwegian public. It is fairly common for prison researchers to be position-ed as potential advocates, but it is even more problematic than usual when the language barriers makes it difficult to adjust the researcher’s initial position.

Gender. Anthropologists have long engaged with the interaction between the researcher’s gendered persona and the field. The researcher must grapple with the discrepancy between the gendered self and the ways in which the researcher is perceived in context. According to Whitehead and Conaway (1986), various accounts of fieldwork show that researchers may subscribe to prescribed gendered categories and performances in the field or, on the contrary, disturb them, in a continuous process of adjustment. Gender perceptions in the field may obstruct or facilitate report, either way generating valuable knowledge (Madison, 2012).

Early on in the research, Dorina was made quite aware that she was a woman in a men’s prison. Prisoners randomly approached her to inquire about her purpose there. They fre-quently went into conversation with her about the pains and frustrations of their imprisonment, one of which was the lack of women (always told to her only half-jokingly). A few prisoners attempted to flirt with her. One inmate in particular made her into the regular target of his sexism. The first time she was subjected to a sexist tirade, Dorina did not quite register it until she had left the prison, hours later, and felt a strong emotional reaction. But these deeply uncomfortable moments were exceptions rather than the norm. Later on, she felt amusement when this happened, as the prisoner seemed to test her
competence or tolerance in this manner. Most prisoners, though, did address her in a fairly paternalistic manner, usually seemingly to educate her with regard to the hardship of life “out there.” Simultaneously, they constructed street-smart, masculine personas for themselves in relation to her purported naivety and femininity. As time went on and field relationships became more relaxed and comfortable, prisoners maintained a sort of reverence toward Dorina—the young, innocent girl researcher—for instance, apologizing when using profane language.

Thomas, while not experiencing (or at least not registering) gendered microaggressions in the same manner as Dorina, was also used as a prop in prisoners’ masculine self-construction work, albeit, perhaps, as a more willing prop than Dorina. He was sometimes included in the kind of “gangster talk” he knew well from his earlier fieldwork in prison (Ugelvik, 2014a). These conversations felt familiar; it was a genre he felt comfortable with. He could even swap other people’s stories and thus participate in the friendly contest of one-upmanship that often characterizes such informal conversation. And while he was not an equal partner in these conversations (he is obviously not very “gangsta” himself), he was not a complete outsider either; he was someone to spar with, even though he was not seen as match fit.

To an extent, our genders did structure the prisoners’ discursive practices and behaviors differently. Dorina was placed in an essentialized feminine position, to be spoken to with respect and protected (to some extent, this was also echoed in the officers’ behavior). Thomas, as a man, was in a position where he was expected to hold his ground and prove himself, in ways that Dorina never had to. He was constructed as more of an equal, someone to talk to on the same level, in contrast to Dorina, who had to be educated and protected. While a shared language contributed to create common ground between Dorina and the Romanian prisoners, her status as female created more of a distance. The exact opposite was the case with Thomas. Our different gendered experiences were obviously also related to differences in our age and experience, to which we now turn.

Age/expertise. The implications of the researcher’s (perceived) age in the field have often remained unaddressed. Age may have a significant impact in the field, in terms of how the researcher is perceived, especially at the intersection with gender. The consequence is often that young (and youngish) researchers and female researchers are not seen as proper grown-up professionals. Thompson (in Ortbals & Rincker, 2009) describes how young female researchers may experience “status inconsistencies” especially in relation to older, male respondents. For instance, Sloan and Wright (2015) describe having to adjust their appearance in order to not appear too young. Being seen as young might carry advantages as well though; Wax and Guillemin (1979) suggest that young researchers may succeed in the field, when they position themselves as learners looking for mentors (the informants) who might more readily choose to share their expert knowledge with someone more junior. In our case, we both experienced being positioned as younger and less experienced than we were, albeit in slightly different ways, and with different consequences.

Thomas was 36 and an experienced prison researcher at the time of the research project. He was frequently seen as less experienced than he was; however, something he had also experienced in the past. At Kongsvinger prison in 2013, as a postdoctoral researcher, people frequently thought he was working on his PhD. This was probably a case of mismatch between observation and expectations: To both prisoners and prison officers, people with PhDs are supposed to be older and have more gray hair than he had at the time. Having turned 30, but being seen as younger, Dorina was taken to be a student by prisoners and prison officers alike. While officers and most prisoners accepted her as a conversation partner, in some cases, her ascribed “student” status was intended to be reductive. For instance, a police officer visiting the prison used “just a student” as a reason to justify her decision to her superior, on the phone to not allow Dorina to accompany one of the prisoners who was being deported. In the field, the association between age and expertise has implications for the researcher’s position. Seen as young and inexperienced, Dorina felt that she had to work much harder to gain respect and cast herself as the researcher, experiencing moments of frustration in relation to this. Having experienced it before, Thomas was perhaps better prepared for the experience. He often made a point of using prison lingo and showing both officers and prisoners that he knew the kind of “inside information” that marks one off as someone who has seen the inside of a prison before.

Becoming “the researcher”. Prisons have been described as a low-trust environment where two clearly established groups are in perpetual conflict (Sparks, Bottoms, & Hay, 1996). As both our projects moved forward, we struggled in different ways to carve out an appropriate field position for ourselves. We both invested considerably in interactions with the various participants in the field in order to create our “researcher” positions. We encountered slightly different obstacles and had to choose between different solutions. Thomas had experienced being put in a sometimes awkward position between established conflict lines in previous research projects (Ugelvik, 2014a, 2014b). Managing the relationships with the two groups sometimes felt like trying to walk two moving tightropes at the same time. Sometimes, the circumstances choose a side for you, and there is not much you can do about it.

Officers working in the evening shift often eat dinner with prisoners. They use their own plates and cutlery though which are washed separately in the officer area washing machine. The blue pattern makes the plates clearly separable from the White prisoners china. The plates are bigger and look nicer. When an officer ask me early on in the fieldwork if I would like some dinner, I say yes, looking forward to having dinner with the prisoners. She brings me an officer’s plate and officer’s cutlery, however, symbolically
positioning me as part of one group rather than the other. The one guy I know well and sit down with leaves soon because he finished his dinner early and wants to make a phone call. I end up sitting at a table all by myself, eating dinner off my blue-patterned prison officer’s plate (Thomas, field notes).

Inclusion attempts can be emotionally satisfying and are slightly flattering, but they may also create tension and problems in an institution that is built around a perpetual cold war-like conflict. These problems can be overcome given time, though, and Thomas ended up, as he has done in previous projects, in a unique, liminal position between established groups. Dorina on the other hand remained more clearly associated with the Romanian prisoners who were the focus of her study:

The four of us Dorina and three Romanian prisoners] decide to sit and talk in the cafeteria, as it is snowing heavily outside. I place my things on the officers’ dinner table, as it was the first table we walk by. One prisoner comments that we should sit at another table, in the corner, as “not to get infected”[,...] As the prisoners go in and out of the cafeteria for smokes, they always return with a grin, reporting the officers’ curiosity regarding our conversation. “To them, you are the enemy within. The one they cannot get rid of” says one prisoner. They seem satisfied by this and that officers can’t understand us when we speak. They tell the officers that we are talking about postrelease, about their plans, and such. They don’t want the officers to know that they are “dishing it out, all the shit that happens” there. (Dorina, field notes)

In sum, our field personas were different in many ways. Dorina was seen as a more junior female foreign national researcher closely connected to a specific group of Romanian prisoners that she visited repeatedly and got to know well. She was a visitor to the prison who had to ask officers to help her to get around. Thomas was seen as a (somewhat) more senior male Norwegian national researcher who was trusted with his own set of keys. He went all around the prison and did not express any particular interest in any more or less establishes subgroups. Following the reigning qualitative social science paradigm, we would expect our different positions to impact on our data in significant ways. Did these differences make a difference? If yes, in what ways? We will now turn to a discussion of these questions.

**Different Researchers, Similar Findings**

When it comes to the prisoners’ experience of being imprisoned in Kongsvinger prison, and despite our slightly different projects and seemingly significantly different field personas, the resulting data materials were in most respects very similar. For illustration purposes, in this article, we have decided to present the prisoners’ perceptions of prison life, as it has been one of the most prevalent themes in the course of our research projects. The following is not meant to fully present the findings from our two projects. Like we stated initially, the point in this article is to discuss reflexivity and researcher positionality, not to report on our findings. For a large part, readers must trust us, then, when we say that our two projects did indeed yield very similar conclusions. We have included the following as illustrations in order to give a taste of what we mean when we assert that our findings were substantially “similar.”

Dorina and Thomas both frequently interacted with prisoners who believed that the prison was essentially a racist institution created to provide foreign national prisoners with a second-class prison experience. In both studies, prisoners often took the hypercritical censorious stance toward the prison, the Norwegian criminal justice system, and the Norwegian government in general described by Mathiesen (1965). However, unlike Mathiesen’s study, we found that this stance was coupled with a strong sense of in-group solidarity and shared sense of destiny. Prisoners often reported feeling like members of a group of outcasts that the Norwegian government was trying to spend as little money on as possible and then transfer or deport as quickly as possible. Unsurprisingly, they did not hold the Norwegian prison system in high regard. Prisoners routinely presented Dorina with more or less accurate criticism of a racist Norwegian system enforced by racist prison officers:

**Prisoner** Everything has changed in Norway. So, you, as a Romanian, or any other nationality, you will never benefit from those jails you see on TV. Those are made for Norwegians. These are made for Romanians. Specially made jails for Romanians, for immigrants. There is not one Norwegian in this prison and there are 200 persons, 200 inmates. And in Oslo [prison], the majority are immigrants. A thousand inmates fit in there.¹ You have been there. You have seen how ugly it gets (Dorina, interview, Kongsvinger).

Similarly, a typical response after hearing Thomas’s standard description of his project:

**Prisoner** The most important thing that you need to understand is that the normal prison for Norwegians, the prisons that have Norwegians also, they are much better. . . When I was transferred here from Bergen prison, I got no opportunity to appeal. A Norwegian prisoner, they can’t just transfer him, he’s got a right to appeal the decision. Not with me. I had already applied for a transfer to another prison, for family reasons, to be closer to my family. I had applied a few weeks before. On the day of my transfer, I was taken to a room and 15 people there were waiting for me. 15 guards!

**Thomas** You must be a very dangerous man?

**Prisoner** No, no, no, I had never ever, not a single report on me in the prison, in Bergen prison, nothing. And then the wing manager showed me my application, he just gave it back to me, he hadn’t signed it, he didn’t even send it to the prison I wanted to go to. He just smiled in my face and gave it to me. That wouldn’t have happened to a Norwegian prisoner, no way.
We both found that prisoners at Kongsvinger often understand any negative decision or bad experience as connected to their status as foreigners and the fact that they were being held in an all-foreign prison. Discrimination and outright racism were frequently used explanatory frames. Even in cases where prisoners only had limited or wrong information, decisions were frequently seen in the context of their general impression of a racist institution. It was a sort of shared catch-all explanation.

This general frustration and the anger directed at the Norwegian state and its criminal justice system was, however, paradoxically often combined with statements about how easy and lax Kongsvinger is. Prisoners frequently ridiculed the prison and its security measures in particular:

**Prisoner:** This is a hotel, man. Prison in my country, that’s something else. [...] This place is completely different. We have single rooms and flat screen TVs and free food, it’s just a complete luxury. For many people, taking a break in here is a good thing. Six months here, you get to calm down, relax, make new plans, and you’re fresh and ready for action when they release you. Perfect! (Thomas Ugelvik, interview, Kongsvinger)

**Prisoner:** This is not like in Romanian prison, heavy, so that you can feel it [...] So, this is not a very heavy prison like elsewhere, this is a mini-prison, so it’s not bad. [...] This is like camp. (Dorina Damsa, interview, Kongsvinger)

When we compare notes, our main impression is one of substantial similarity and overlapping findings. By and large, the prisoners we talked to for our two projects wanted to tell us the same story about Kongsvinger prison. We both encountered prisoners who were frustrated with the prison and with the Norwegian system. Paradoxically, at the same time, many prisoners expressed a desire to ridicule the prison as not prison-like enough: “It is not a proper prison,” “it is more like a hotel,” “I actually enjoy being here,” etc. In a nutshell, Kongsvinger prison was described to both Dorina and Thomas as the world’s most comfortable racist institution.

**Conclusion: Insignificant Differences?**

Crewe argues that researchers doing fieldwork should remember that they are “the least important person there” (Crewe, 2014, p. 401) and that we should, in our reflexive writing, prioritize what other researchers can learn from our experiences, and what these experiences reveal about substantive issues, rather than about ourselves. According to Rowe (2014), our field experiences should only be reflexively discussed to the extent that they actually made an impact on the research process. What actually impacts data collection in exactly what ways may be very difficult to tell in practice, however. We did occupy different positions in the field, and we did experience the field differently. After reflecting on and discussing our separate findings, and viewing them in relation to our field positions, however, we are not all that certain that positionality really mattered much at all. Of course, there are differences. Prisoners flirted with Dorina, and they wanted to protect her. Thomas was seen as more “important” in the sense that he could not quite get beyond the expectation that his position in the system might be used to help prisoners in some way. But overall, to someone interested in the experience of prisoners in Kongsvinger prison, the data sets are very similar. We can only conclude that the differences between our two field positions at the intersection of citizenship, age, and gender mattered little for our two projects. They were not differences that really made a difference.

On the one hand, this can be said to strengthen the reliability (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) or dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our findings; two different researchers reached similar conclusions. On the other, this does present us with something of a puzzle. Based on the current methodology state of the art, we would expect the differences between our field personas to manifest themselves as substantial differences in the data we collected. When this did not happen, it is tempting to ask what might have been a difference that really would make a difference. Speculating on that question, in the context of Kongsvinger prison, one obvious answer would be to wear a uniform, or in other ways be seen as identical with the prison and its staff, or to be a prisoner. If one of us were, for instance, a convict criminologist (Davies, 2015; Earle, 2014) it may have changed the resulting data. Other consequential differences might also, potentially, exist. Perhaps differences in social class would have a bigger impact than the differences we have discussed here. Perhaps a bigger age difference might have created more clearly observable differences in the data collected. Then again, perhaps not. All this remains speculative. Only an empirical investigation of these claims, mindful of the research topic and context, may answer these questions. When it comes to the two projects discussed in this article, however, the fact of the matter seems to be that prisoners in Kongsvinger prison presented their experience in a certain way. Their complex experiences of marginality and otherness and their need to criticize and resist the prison regime did not seem to be impacted significantly by the differences between different researchers. In our case, we agree that we produced the data as specific people, with specific bodies, biographies, and ways of being in the world. But we wonder whether very different people would have produced very different data. Perhaps the similar findings despite our different researcher personas can be said to reflect the weight of the prisoners’ experiences and the level of frustration and uncertainty created by the prison context.

In conclusion, we should stress that we are not mounting an all-out attack on reflexivity in social research. We do not think that we should stop worrying about researcher positionality altogether. Reflecting on and actively engaging with researcher field personas may in many cases be an important data collection tool in its own right. There might also be other good “external” reasons to care about reflexivity and researcher positionality. If we see researchers as centrally implicated not only in the fieldwork process but also in the topics they have selected for study and in the analysis and writing up of research
findings (Phillips & Earle, 2010), critical examination of the researcher’s own motivation and the presuppositions, and personal history that leads to a particular study should continue to be a virtue (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). The discipline of criminology in particular will often involve doing research on behalf of the powerful (Lumsden & Winter, 2014), which makes it particularly important to avoid uncritically adopting state problem definitions. Reflexivity accommodates differences against simplistic prediction. For such reasons, reflexivity and researcher positionality should continue to be part of our research articles also in the future. In this article, we have argued simply that we should not automatically assume, a priori, that the impact we as specific individuals have on the data collection process will be relevant in all research projects. Sometimes, our research might even be better served if we concentrate more on constructing thick descriptions of the field site and the way informants react to it and put less effort into writing ourselves into the mix.

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Note
1. Oslo prison has a capacity of little over 400 prisoners of which approximately 50% were foreign as of June 2016.

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