When access is denied: Conducting an interview through letter writing

Emma Burtt
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract
Access to prisons in England and Wales is becoming ever more restricted to researchers and all projects must have sufficient links to Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) priorities to be considered. What are the alternatives when there is no such link or when access has otherwise been denied? This article focuses on one possible solution – conducting a qualitative interview via letter.

Drawing on my own experience of conducting such interviews with prisoners maintaining innocence, I document how the method can work in practice. Although not without difficulty, written interviews are capable of producing rich, qualitative data and provide benefits to both the researcher and researched when compared to traditional face-to-face interviews. I ultimately demonstrate how interviews via letter offer a valuable alternative when interacting with people, not only in prison but across all secure estates.

Keywords
interview, letter writing, prisons, access, wrongful conviction, alternative methods

Introduction
Qualitative methods are valued for their ability to create depth and understanding; to capture reality as the participant experiences it and provide the context and meaning behind such events (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The aim of most qualitative work is to develop a comprehensive picture of the participants’ world, or a particular event in their lives, in their own terms and to authentically reflect their lived experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). What can a researcher do, however, if access to their desired population is restricted?
During my own research into prisoners maintaining innocence in England and Wales, it became clear that the ‘controversial’ nature of the topic and the prospect of the prison estate being exposed to negative attention severely restricted the likelihood of direct access being granted. As an alternative, I decided to conduct a semi-structured interview via the medium of letter. Participants were given reasonably clear guidelines prior to writing their first accounts and, in the majority of cases, I replied with further questions, creating a series of letter exchanges, rather than a single narrative account. Letters produced important narrative data but also allowed a dialogue to develop that in some senses paralleled the practice of a face-to-face interview.

This article explores this little-utilised method. I provide a brief outline of my own fieldwork process to illustrate how the method can work in practice. I further detail both the general benefits as a research method and the associated benefits to participants, when contrasted to a traditional semi-structured interview. I continue by discussing the practical difficulties that may be encountered, focussing particularly on the distance between the researcher and the researched. I demonstrate throughout how conducting an interview via letter is a useful tool that offers a valuable alternative when interacting with people across all secure estates.

Participant writing

Although capable of producing insightful and powerful data, participant writing – broadly including written accounts, poems, diaries, autobiographies and life histories – either in archived form or produced in response to particular research questions, has often been overlooked in preference for in-person interviews.

Social scientists have, however, begun to recognise the benefits of written narratives. This change in attitude is well highlighted by the renewed interest in the Mass Observation Project, an archive of over one million written accounts, founded in the 1930s and revived in the 1980s (see Smart, 2011). Until recently the archive was predominantly used by historians rather than sociologists who were sceptical of the representativeness of the sample and the supposed lack of intellectual rigour of free-writing (Smart, 2011). Qualitative social scientists have now begun to utilise the archive and acknowledge the value it has as a sociological resource, as well as the rich qualitative data that can be produced in written form more generally (Smart, 2011).

Autobiographical accounts have also been used as a method of interacting with minorities and marginalised individuals, particularly in the feminist, LGBT, and anti-violence movements (Kehily, 1995). As will be discussed below, the relative safety of the method and the power it has to transfer ownership and create voice make it particularly valuable for interacting with vulnerable groups. Most adopt a technique of ‘free-writing’ where participants are asked, for example, to recount their experiences of a particular event with little instruction. Very few, however, utilise a hybrid approach of conducting a semi-structured interview via letter – the method I document in this article.

Fieldwork process

For my own research, I pursued three main routes to recruit a sample. A large proportion of participants responded to advertisements in various prison newspapers and wrongful
conviction charity newsletters. I also approached representatives from campaigning
groups and legal organisations and asked them to provide details of the research to their
members and clients. Finally, after a basic Internet search, I contacted known prisoners
maintaining innocence directly.

Research packs were sent once initial contact had been made and participants had
expressed an interest in taking part. These included an information sheet, a consent form,
and a question sheet. Stamped addressed envelopes and writing paper were also sent to
avoid unnecessary cost to participants. In certain cases, where prisoners requested help
or advice, either legal or personal, I sent a contact sheet listing the addresses and tele-
phone numbers of relevant organisations that could assist with their queries.

The sample included 64 individuals, 61 men and three women (5%). The age of the
participants ranged from 28 to 77 years, and averaged 49 years. Participants were drawn
from across the prison estate (located in 41 prisons) and were fairly evenly distributed
between Category A (34%), B (25%) and C (38%) establishments (only two participants
were located in Category D prisons).

It was made clear that involvement was entirely voluntary, that participation would
not affect participants’ legal cases in any way and that no personal information would be
shared with any third party. Furthermore, the right to withdraw was always available and
if at any time participants felt uncomfortable with the process or what they had revealed
they could withdraw their consent to participate. A particularly advantageous aspect of
letter writing in this context is that there was no pressure to respond – participants could
simply choose not to reply.

The question sheet was nearly identical for every participant, focusing on the same
themes to create consistency in the subjects covered. It consisted of a series of broad,
standard, open-ended topics of discussion with a small number of prompt questions to
guide the prisoner in telling his or her story. Participants were relatively free to discuss
what they felt was of importance while also encouraged to concentrate on particular
areas of their narrative. Although they were told in the information sheet that they could
refuse to answer any question or ignore a particular topic entirely, very few did. The vast
majority wrote on all subjects that I had requested and no topic appeared to be beyond
discussion, with most tackling difficult and emotional areas.

Responses ranged in length from one page to 60, some typed, the vast majority hand-
written. As participants could, to a large extent, dictate how they interpreted topics and
structured their accounts, I had little control over what was produced. In some cases, this
flexibility did create letters that were not particularly focussed or relevant or instead fix-
ated on a particular aspect of the experience while ignoring all others.

Personalised further questions were sent to nearly all participants (91%), 86% of
whom replied, with a handwritten letter thanking them for their contribution thus far.
Responding was consequently not only time-consuming but also emotionally demand-
ing, with the constant need to be respectful of participants’ experiences without appear-
ing to minimise or judge them. More generally, these further questions requested detail,
elaboration and clarification and were used to confirm understanding and query any
ambiguities within accounts. Replies thus added a certain richness to the data. Further
questions also allowed me to redirect and focus particular accounts.
Given the nature of letter writing and the time available, I could thoroughly reflect on accounts before replies were sent – a luxury denied in face-to-face interviewing. This meant that further questions were more considered than would otherwise be the case and I was able to fully explore avenues perhaps not obvious at first reading. Moreover, I could draw on themes and areas of interest from other participants’ accounts in order to establish whether these were universal themes, that had just failed to be mentioned in initial narratives or were unique to certain individuals.

In addition to written responses, I also received various pieces of documentary evidence, which included case files; forensic evidence reports; psychological reports; Parole Board decision letters; prison leaflets; newspaper articles; diaries; poems; and sample letters to MPs, solicitors, campaigning groups, and various prison governors, etc. These documents helped me to construct a fuller and clearer picture of prison life and acted as a partial form of data triangulation (see Yeasmin and Rahman, 2012). After replies to further questioning had been received, a handwritten thank you card was sent. I decided to handwrite these letters in order to create a more personal research experience for participants, particularly as they had often written of their private lives in great detail to a complete stranger.

Benefits of the letter writing method

A major advantage of conducting an interview via letter is that it is capable of reaching otherwise unreachable populations. For prisons research, the method avoids difficulties of access and allows communication with participants from a variety of research sites. Prisoners maintaining innocence are not located in certain institutions; they come from across the prison estate, all security categories and all geographical areas. Letter writing enabled me to make and maintain contact across this wide site and did not restrict the research to certain areas or certain prisons. In theory, it facilitated access to every prison without the need to negotiate with individual governors or the National Offender Management Service (now HMPPS) and without the expense of travelling to each research site.

Furthermore, rather like the traditional semi-structured interview, letter writing has the flexibility to ensure that the research goes beyond fixed questions and rigid categories of behaviour. As relatively little has been written on the prison experience and coping mechanisms of those claiming wrongful conviction it was useful to provide space for participants to raise issues that they thought were relevant (see Alvesson, 2011). General themes and topics taken from the previous literature were included in the question sheet but new and unexpected ideas could emerge and be elaborated upon with follow-up questions, adding both detail and a richness of thought. As prison experience and coping is an inherently personal and individual issue, complex experiences could be articulated without restraining categorisation as the participant was allowed to define and develop issues of importance to them (Alvesson, 2011; Fontana and Frey, 2005). They were able to write freely, employing their own concepts and terminology and space was left open so they could, to a certain extent, define the questions that they wanted to be asked. Both the topics and the order in which they were tackled could be interpreted flexibly to suit
the participant and this flexibility mitigated possible researcher bias endemic in direct questioning.

Participants were also not constrained by time. Unlike a face-to-face interview, where time may be limited to an hour or two, participants could spend as long as was needed, or as long as they wanted, to complete the research task. They were not rushed and had time to consider the questions and their responses to them, a particularly valuable feature when discussing sensitive and emotive topics, although one that could cause a degree of premeditation (Nelson, 2013). This time may also have been particularly helpful for less literate participants who were allowed the space to think about what they wanted to write and how they wanted to word it before they did so, without the pressure to respond immediately. Indeed, many participants, like Patrick, who was serving a life sentence for murder, were grateful for the time they had to reflect:

It is much easier to put pen to paper giving ample time to think. In a speech or statement, my thoughts appear briefly in focus then dissolve into confusion again before I can adequately express them.

It was clear that some had spent a considerable amount of time on their accounts and this allowed them to cover the topics in as much detail as they felt necessary. In many cases this detail was considerable – more than could be covered in a traditional interview. Similarly, as there were no time restrictions, the relationship with particular participants was ongoing over a period of months. After I had received accounts and responses to further questions some participants continued to write, providing updates as their situations changed, as they reached certain milestones, and as they progressed or were refused progression through the prison system. This created a continuing dialogue and ongoing conversation in contrast to the one-off interview transaction.

Due to the emotive nature of many of the topics, it was also possible that some participants found it easier to write about their experiences than to talk face-to-face. Speaking can be dangerous, particularly in the prison environment, and the speaker may be disbelieved, judged, criticised, rejected or humiliated (Bolton, 2003). Writing appears safer. There is no social interaction or direct audience capable of criticising or inflicting harm. I was not looking to judge their past or present decisions and participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity (although note concerns below). This comparative safety encouraged and allowed participants to express highly personal, traumatic experiences and emotions without the pressure of direct questioning inherent in a face-to-face interaction and without fear of my reaction.

Vivienne Elizabeth (2008) further suggests that data collected through interviews ‘tends not to be able to capture the intangible dimensions of our lives – our emotions, imagination and memories – as well as free-writing’. Conducting an interview via letter occupies a middle ground between the traditional interview and free-writing, ensuring a basic structure but also providing plenty of space for participants to discuss the topics and areas of their life that feel most relevant to them. Data produced from this research method thus has the capacity to produce ‘highly self-revelatory’ accounts based not only on experiences and events but also on the place and meaning of such experiences within the lives of participants (Vivienne Elizabeth, 2008; Portelli, 2005: 2).
Indeed, the letters I received were full of rich, meaningful narratives and incredibly personal and detailed information. Participants were articulate and insightful, writing in considerable detail and depth. Their accounts presented a powerful and intimate view of their social world and experiences.

**Benefits to participants**

Although my research had no direct, tangible benefit – time and contribution were not compensated – other individual, less apparent benefits may have resulted. First, and arguably most importantly, the research gave a voice to those that took part. In prison, maintaining innocence is largely a denied experience. The prison authorities, the wider criminal justice system, and the public work on the premise that the court produced the correct decision and, as such, there is a reluctance to acknowledge that anyone could be wrongfully convicted. There is scepticism about those who protest their innocence and often their experiences and emotions are negated and rejected.

In his work on illness, Arthur Bochner highlights how constructing and communicating personal narratives are wilful acts designed to make a participant’s situation meaningful and operates as a defence to suffering in silence (2001). Letter writing gave participants in my research the opportunity and freedom to tell their story and express themselves fully, knowing that I saw value in their experiences and opinions. Many stated that they had simply never been asked how they felt about their conviction or how it had affected their lives and were grateful that someone was genuinely interested and taking their version of events seriously. Often for the first time, their accounts were not minimised or dismissed, they were recognised and heard. Someone was listening and entering into a dialogue with them that had previously been refused, as illustrated by Andrew, who had served 20 years of a life sentence for murder and conspiracy to rob:

> I have been fighting to overturn my wrongful convictions for nearly two decades now and in that time no one has ever asked me the questions you propose. . . I have found that no one in the ‘system’ concerns themselves with such questions. Perhaps that is because they would have to acknowledge that I might actually be suffering a miscarriage of justice. No one wants to acknowledge that.

Some may have had contact with innocence projects or lawyers but these conversations were, by their very nature, legal. They were unable to discuss their experiences of prison, their emotions, their fears, their relationship problems. Many appeared to treat me as an ‘understanding stranger’, a sympathetic outsider who was interested in their story and aware of the problems they were facing but who ultimately had no authority and was not in a position to directly judge (Dexter, 2006). As a result, participants were generally more than happy to write openly about the difficult situations they had encountered and may have gained comfort, support, and reassurance during the process of sharing (Couser, 1997). This was the case for Stanley, who had served 14 years for rape:

> It was good to ‘talk’ about the state of my life. . . Thanks for being my sounding board.
Further to having a voice, participants gained meaning from knowing that their experiences and accounts had value, that their stories mattered (Bochner, 2001). They wanted to bring their suffering to light, control how others saw them, and counter the rejection and stigmatisation that they felt (Bochner, 2001; Kehily, 1995). They sought to impart their knowledge and teach others of the dangers of wrongful conviction. As a result, some participants formed false expectations regarding the impact of the research and wanted it to have a direct influence on policy (see Bosworth et al., 2005). Ashley, who had served five years, expected political implications and reform to develop as a result of his participation:

So that the people in power will listen when you tell them what you have learned from us and about the way the system is broken and needs fixing.

It was thus necessary for me to be realistic about the practical applications and possible outcomes of the research when responding to participants. It was important to manage their expectations and be open and clear about the limitations of such a study and the likelihood of it having direct effect on prison and criminal justice policy.

Conducting the interview via letter strengthened the voice given to participants as the method transferred control and ownership to the individual in a way that traditional interviews cannot. Although the question sheet directed them to an extent, participants were free to choose which points were most relevant to them and could place the emphasis on what they thought was important. They were not constrained by the topics listed and most, if not all, chose to disregard certain aspects of the question sheet, add topics of their own, and elaborate on the issues which had most effect on them personally. These elaborations differed by individual, depending on their particular focus, and allowed a unique insight into their lives and thought processes. Participants thus had a role in driving the content of the research and were consequently able to tell their stories in a manner that was faithful to understandings of themselves (Anderson, 2002).

Vivienne Elizabeth (2008) highlights how writing is in and of itself an act of agency, an opportunity to narrate personal experiences in personal terms. Such agency is an important element in overcoming traumatic experiences, particularly if words have previously been manipulated or if agency has been denied in the past. Participants’ accounts were theirs, and although guided, directed, and subject to my interpretation, they retained ownership of them in a way not possible with an interview transcript.

Evidence similarly suggests that personal and expressive writing can enhance the writer’s psychological, emotional, and physiological well-being. Many studies have documented how writing can have a therapeutic effect on those dealing with stressful and traumatic experiences (Bochner, 2001; Bolton, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Penn, 2001; Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999; Richardson, 2000), regardless of age, gender, education or class (Smyth and Greenberg, 2000). I hoped that letter writing could benefit individuals by offering an outlet through which to express their painful experiences, reflect on their situation and consider aspects of their lives that they had perhaps never previously considered. Many contributors stated that they had found participation to be a positive experience. Bradley, who had served 12 years of a life sentence for murder (with a 15-year tariff), acknowledged a therapeutic element of writing his account:
I found it an interesting, thought provoking exercise. It’s helped me step back and take a broader perspective of my situation and time in prison.

As Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2012) illustrated in their own study, the exercise of writing can force participants to take time to reflect on and communicate previously silenced experiences and feelings. This can provide the opportunity to re-evaluate and find new meaning in often complicated emotions and responses to them (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Additionally, as account-writing incorporates a sense of sharing it may have allowed a release of anger and pain as a form of catharsis (Plummer et al. 1993; Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005) as mentioned by a number of participants, including Dylan who had served nearly two years of an eight-and-a-half-year sentence for rape:

> I guess writing to people helps me to bring my feelings to the surface so that I have to deal with them, confront them and resolve them.

Writing is, however, not without its risks and these may attenuate the emotional benefits somewhat. Due to the nature of the ‘wrongful’ conviction experience, and prison experiences more generally, it was necessary for participants to recall, consider and record very personal, emotive and traumatic events, ones that may well have triggered painful memories. It was therefore possible that participants may have encountered distress when completing the task and were thus at risk of re-traumatisation, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and helpless (Connolly Baker and Mazza, 2004; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012; Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005). This risk was intensified by the fact that participants were still living the traumatic experience. Indeed, some, like Reggie, revealed that they were emotional as a result of discussing the topics covered in the research:

> Anytime I narrate my story it leaves me with almost a nervous breakdown.

In this respect, conducting the interview via letter had both positive and negative aspects. Generally, letters did not appear as intrusive as interviews. Participants were in control as to the topics they discussed and there was far less pressure, as compared to an in-person interview, to respond to difficult subjects. If participants found themselves upset, they could simply take a break and return to the task when in a better frame of mind or decide to end the account. On the other hand, participants were largely alone in their cell at the time of writing, often late at night. In a face-to-face interview situation if a participant is exhibiting signs of distress the interviewer can offer reassurance or, to a certain extent, comfort. They may steer the questioning away from the emotive topic and ultimately they have the power to end the interview completely. They may also suggest an immediate referral to a support service. Such strategies are not available for a writing task and ultimately I had no control in diffusing or mitigating distressing situations. Such lack of control, on my part, was highlighted by Howard, who had served 15 years of a life sentence (with a 25-year tariff) for murder:

> My personal strategy is to literally switch it off, I am writing this in the early hours as it is switched back on and once on it becomes so very difficult to turn off, which is why you could
find difficulty recruiting ‘customers’, as the constant remembrance of injustice can actually start eating you.

In an attempt to diminish the risk posed, I explained in the participant information sheet that distress could result from providing a written account. I further stated that participants were under no pressure to respond and could withdraw from the research at any point without the need to provide a reason – participants could simply choose not to reply. I also made clear that participants could omit topics if they felt they were too sensitive or likely to cause them undue harm. I hoped that assurances of anonymity in the final thesis would create a context of emotional safety, capable of allaying fears of external judgement.

This risk of harm was, in part, another reason why I always responded to letters. I did not want participants to be left emotionally raw and hurting without any acknowledgement from me. Where possible I tried to end my correspondence on a positive note, detailing how helpful they had been and how valuable their contribution was. Finally, if any individual claimed to be experiencing distress, I sent a contact sheet specifying how to access emotional support.

**Difficulties of conducting an interview via letter**

As well as the possible risk of harm, there are a number of other practical difficulties that may be encountered when conducting an interview via letter. From my own experience, many of these difficulties were relatively small and did not seem to affect the sample of participants or the accounts they produced.

Perhaps the biggest limitation of letter writing as a method is the need for participants to be literate. In order to undertake the research task, participants need a certain level of competence in written English. In a prison sample, such a problem becomes significant as literacy skills are far lower than in the general population.\(^\text{12}\) Prisoners maintaining innocence, as well as the general prisoner population, however, regularly undertake educational activities while imprisoned. My participants were frequently pursuing qualifications in law, a subject that involves a great deal of reading, in order to assist their campaigning efforts. As a result, it may be that, as a group, prisoners claiming wrongful conviction are slightly more literate than the general prison population.

Nevertheless, some prisoners could obviously not respond at all. The very fact that advertisements to participate were in newspapers prevented the illiterate from taking part while the written nature of the task may have deterred those with only basic literacy skills. Consequently, there was a natural and inevitable self-selection\(^\text{13}\) of more educated prisoners and although their experiences were no more or less valuable than others, they were better able to articulate these thoughts and feelings on paper.

In order to overcome some of the problems associated with literacy, I ensured that the participant information sheet, consent form and particularly the question sheet were kept at a fairly basic level. I used relatively simple language, frequent spacing between the topics and a standard font. I hoped that these features would enable prisoners with rudimentary skills to participate while the general nature of the topics and opportunities for elaboration would also appeal to those with more advanced ability. Replies with further
questions could be tailored to the individual participant’s level, based on an evaluation of their skills from the initial account.

From the accounts I received, there appeared to be a good cross-section of abilities. Accounts varied in length, ranging from one page to 60, and differed vastly in terms of spelling and grammar, with some letters resembling streams of consciousness and others nicely crafted accounts. For some participants English was not their first language. However, all participants were able to effectively convey their experiences and express their emotional reactions. Even those with basic literacy skills were able to contribute fully to the research and all accounts were tremendously informative and valuable.

Another difficulty of letter writing as a method, particular to the prison context, was that letters did not always make it through the system to their intended recipient. Ingoing and outgoing mail could be read by prison staff, essentially subject to spot-checks, and ultimately could be prohibited from leaving or entering the prison. On at least one occasion the account had been stopped from leaving the prison entirely, due to its ‘controversial’ nature. On others, outgoing initial letters responding to the advertisement were stopped in the mailroom and ingoing question sheets were not passed on to participants. When informed about this – often by family, friends, or even MPs representing the participants’ constituencies – I sent duplicates. However, it is impossible to know with any certainty how many letters were stopped that I remain unaware of. Somewhat connectedly, a small number of prisons had a policy of restricting the number of pages that could be sent out, usually to four. When this was the case, participants often sent multiple letters.

Although my confidentiality was assured to all participants, I obviously could not control whether accounts were read by prison authorities and, as such, could not ensure full confidentiality. Indeed, during the fieldwork period, it was obvious that some letters had been opened. It was thus a concern that what they wrote, if read by prison officers, could have implications not only for their general prison life but also for their future, particularly with regards to parole hearings. In terms of the research, it is possible that some participants self-censored and were unwilling to share contentious or private details, fearful of the consequences that candid ‘truth’ telling could have on their progress, and as a result may have produced more guarded accounts.

Nevertheless, all participants were aware of this risk and most were commonly writing letters to their family, almost certainly containing more critical content than was sent as part of my research. Participants were also under no pressure to address topics that they considered likely to cause them difficulty within the prison if read. In order to circumvent the possibility of staff opening their accounts, some participants used ‘Rule 39’. Prison Rule 39 ensures that confidential legal correspondence is not read. Although not covered by this rule, it is likely that the University of Oxford address helped in allowing these letters to pass through unopened. All mail entering the prison was marked ‘Private and Confidential’ and when replying to those who had used Rule 39 I purposely did not include quoted material from original accounts.

In spite of these confidentiality concerns, accounts from participants were full of personal and detailed information and all were, unsurprisingly, critical of the prison system and the criminal justice system more generally. There was, therefore, no real sense that participants were unduly censoring themselves.
Finally, the significance of interpretation or, more importantly, misinterpretation, on both sides of the research project, must be considered. Participants will inevitably subjectively interpret the questions to suit their own understanding of the wording or topic more generally and it is possible that ambiguous wording on the question sheet may lead to inaccuracies in the data. Nevertheless, such ambiguity may on occasion be helpful. Indeed, I purposely kept topics relatively open in order to allow participants to interpret them according to their own frames of reference. Similarly, ‘specialised’ terms, such as fairness and justice, were kept vague in a deliberate attempt to understand participants’ meanings of them.

However, I discovered that the wording of particular questions was not always straightforward. As an example, particular concern was raised over the term ‘wrongful conviction’. Some prisoners, both those who participated and those who did not, were troubled by my use of the term. They stated that they were not ‘claiming wrongful conviction’ but ‘maintaining innocence’ and saw a fundamental difference between the two expressions. The former was viewed as a derogatory term, which suggested that I was questioning their innocence and led some, such as Jamie, who had served 13 years of a life sentence (with a 20-year tariff) for murder, to interpret my tone and position in a negative way:

Also I’ve been sceptical about whether to do this or not as over the past 12+ years I’ve lost trust in people and especially just a name on a piece of paper, please don’t be offended by this as its [sic] my issue and not yours. I’ve re-read your letter a couple of times and tried to work out why you’re doing your research into innocent people in jail, as you used the words ‘those claiming wrongful conviction’.

As a result, particularly in replies, I took great care over the wording of questions so as to not cause offence. Likewise, it was more difficult in letters than in face-to-face interviews to ensure that my interpretation of the accounts was objective. Unlike in an in-person interview situation, emphasis and tone needed to be inferred in the abstract. It was far harder to gauge and ‘read’ the situation and emotion behind a piece of writing, or even a phrase, as context was often missing and again had to be inferred. As Alessandro Portelli states, ‘the same statement may have quite contradictory meanings, according to the speaker’s intonation, which cannot be detected in transcript’ (1981: 98). He continues that it is possible for a participant to recount in a few words events that they ascribe great importance to, while dwelling at length on brief, unimportant incidents (Portelli, 1981). It was possible that these nuances went unnoticed in the written accounts I received.

**Distance between the researcher and researched**

Another particularly distinct aspect of conducting an interview via letter is the distance between the participants and interviewer during the fieldwork period. In qualitative research utilising observation or in-person interview, both parties are, in the majority of cases, present in the same physical location. The lack of proximity when using letter writing as a means to interact with participants introduces fundamental differences and
adds another dimension to the research project that must be considered, one that both complicates and alleviates certain difficulties. At a basic level, there is a difficulty in building rapport with participants, often cited as a critical aspect of interview practice (Neuman et al. 2004; Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Participants were asked to write a substantial account, detailing their often painful and traumatic experiences, to a complete stranger who they had never seen and did not know if they could fully trust. Unlike in an observation situation I could not immerse myself in the prison in order to build such trust. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2012) suggest that, as a result of being unable to ascertain the trustworthiness of the researcher, participants may try to safeguard themselves from being too vulnerable. It is thus possible that participants excluded material that they deemed too sensitive or dangerous for the public domain (see Kehily, 1995; Portelli, 2005).

Allessandro Portelli, when discussing approaches to oral history, suggests that it is, however, the researcher’s ‘openness to listening and to dialogue, and the respect for the narrators, that establishes a mutual acceptance based on difference [which] opens up the narrative space’ (2005: 3). In this account, it is claimed that similarity, and equally rapport, are not the only means available to establish trust and enable full participant expression (Portelli, 2005). Portelli asserts that it is a shared will to listen to and accept each other critically that creates the common ground necessary for meaningful discussion (Portelli, 2005). In my own research, when initial accounts were written no rapport had been developed but the fact that I was in a learning situation, prepared to listen to and respect the participant’s knowledge, created an openness in which difficult topics could be and were expressed, as illustrated by Kieran, who had served three and a half years of a 15-year sentence for affray and carrying an offensive weapon:

I don’t know you Emma but I am sat here writing away and I feel I could tell you anything.

In any event, it was not impossible for a relationship to develop and for rapport to be built through mail. Some participants were undertaking degrees, were university graduates or had children who were; others had written or were in the process of writing books and could thus identify with the writing process; some had previously been research participants with academics known to me; and others simply had similar interests. All of these details, when developed through ongoing correspondence, allowed rapport to be built. They were tiny details in the overall picture but ones that made the process seem more of a conversation, rather than a transaction.

The distance also had distinct benefits. In face-to-face interview situations, participants can be influenced by the personality and social identity of the researcher. It is well established that such ‘interviewer effects’ can affect the data provided (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Noaks and Wincup, 2004) and it is necessary to understand and account for the fact that participants will observe and judge an interviewer’s personal characteristics and behaviours when responding (Portelli, 2005). The perceived attitude of the researcher can similarly influence interviewees into reacting in a certain way based on what he or she believes the ‘correct’ response is.

It is thus obvious that any interview is a piece of social interaction. In some respects, letters were no different but interviewer effects were minimised considerably. The
distance afforded allowed free expression, unhindered by my presence. Accounts were
not affected by my personal traits as participants were unable to ascertain, and therefore
unable to make judgements, about characteristics such as age, race, social class, appearance,
experience, or expectations.16

Likewise, written accounts are ‘not influenced by another’s interjections or their looks of surprise, puzzlement or amusement etcetera’ (Elizabeth, 2008). Participants were not reacting to my presence or altering their accounts based on perceived cues. Due to my absence, their accounts were uninterrupted by moments of self-consciousness and attempts to ascertain if responses were being correctly understood. Indeed, the distance inherent in the letter writing process removed many of the barriers encountered in traditional interview practice. The method was thus capable of producing less contaminated accounts as I was significantly less able to influence the narrative.

Of course the absence of an attentive listener limited the opportunities for reassurance and may have led to participants reciting ‘stock’ stories (Ibid; Kehily, 1995) while all were aware that they were writing for an audience. It is possible that I, or the participants imagined version of me, was thus virtually present. The effects of this presence are difficult to determine but an audience, even one that is imagined, is likely to alter the ways in which participants tell their stories. It has been well established in the methodological literature that ‘voice’ is malleable and dynamic and particular aspects of writing, including fluency, content, style, structure, and language selection, are influenced by the audience, the participant’s relationship with them, and the context of the conversation (Connolly Baker and Mazza, 2004; Nelson, 2013; Plummer et al. 1993). It is possible that participants attempted to anticipate what was relevant and of interest to me when writing their accounts, emphasising particular aspects of their experience but repressing others in an effort to ‘get it right’ (see Portelli, 1981; Onyx and Small, 2001; Kehily, 1995). Similarly, my imagined presence but inability to offer reassurance, may have meant that stories were interrupted or rewritten by concern that I may not understand.

However, as the account continued and the handwriting deteriorated, it appeared that participants lost the sense that they were taking part in research, in a way not possible when conducting face-to-face questioning. Participants seemed to forget that someone would be reading their descriptions and instead got lost in recounting important episodes of their lives. Tensions and contradictions were revealed, emotional reactions explained and behaviours defended and justified. Letters, at first sight appearing as messy and illogical paragraphs, contained an internal logic, the thought process of the participant recorded and exposed on the page.

**Conclusion**

Although it is clear that conducting an interview via letter does present some distinct difficulties, it is a method capable of producing important archives of rich, raw, painful, and beautiful data, made all the more personal by the penmanship of the authors – their lives writ large on the page. It is a valuable tool through which to communicate with participants and this is evidenced by the accounts that have been produced. Participants were generous with their time and experiences, covering difficult topics without knowing me personally and fully engaging in the written task. It is hoped that these accounts,
and the research more generally, authentically reflect their experiences and capture a complete illustration of this particular period in their lives. In prisons research, where restrictions on access are ever tighter, letter writing should be viewed not just as a ‘Plan B’ but as a significant qualitative method of enquiry.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Carolyn Hoyle, Mary Bosworth, Rachel Condry and Julian Roberts for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

**Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**ORCID iD**

Emma Burtt [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4622-7932](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4622-7932)

**Notes**

1. I was denied institutional research access. I could, however, have visited individual participants. These visits would have been included in their general allowance of visiting orders, thereby denying their family or friends. Given the importance of family relationships to these prisoners I doubt that many of my participants would have agreed to this. Visits to Category A institutions (the highest security category in England and Wales) would also require multiple security clearances by the police – one for each individual prisoner I visited. Alternatively, I could have approached individual governors. Participants were, however, housed in 41 different institutions and letter writing allowed me to communicate with 64 participants without having to negotiate access 41 times.

2. All participants wrote to me at least twice. Nine participants wrote two letters (14%), 23 participants wrote three (36%), 15 participants wrote four letters (23%), 9 participants wrote five (14%), 4 participants wrote six (6%), 2 participants wrote seven (3%), 1 wrote nine (2%), and 1 wrote eleven letters (2%).

3. The number of women in the sample is proportionate to the general prison population.

4. This is a fairly high average given the age distribution of the national prison population. However, given the substantial time served by many participants and the rise of prisoners being sentenced in later life for non-contemporary ‘historic’ sexual offences, this is not entirely surprising.

5. The security categories of prisons in England and Wales. Category A offers the highest security and Category D the lowest.

6. As the fieldwork was a continual process, it was possible to slightly alter the research tools before sending them to later respondents. On occasion, the question sheet was modified in response to participants – questions or topics were clarified and research themes were opened up and added. The information sheet was also amended in response to participant queries.

7. Just under half, 42%, provided supplementary information (27 participants). The vast majority of these participants sent two or more sources of additional data.

8. Emails would have a similar reach and may be more suitable for difficult to reach populations with access to computers.
9. Letter writing also allowed me the freedom to set the research agenda. If granted institutional research access, the study must fit within particular institutional strategies, which may unnecessarily limit the research.
10. Although, of course, writing leaves evidence, which perhaps negates this relative safety. Once written, accounts become permanent, incapable of being unwritten, and once sent the writer has little to no control over its use.
11. As such, there is the potential for methods that produce in-depth narratives to be more extractive and exploitative. Care must be taken to ensure that participants are fully comfortable with what they have revealed and understand that they can withdraw from the study even after their account has been written. Of course, it is possible that participants will feel uncomfortable as a result of my interpretation of their accounts and the conclusions that I draw from them rather than what they have written per se. Participants did not have an opportunity to comment on draft chapters and have only seen a summary of the findings. There may thus be a temporal lag in the emergence of discomfort but an inability to withdraw once the thesis has been written. However, such a position is likely to be similar across methods, particularly with spoken interviews. All data, however it is gained, is subject to the authors’ interpretation and critical analysis, which may well conflict with participants’ versions of themselves.
12. Although letter writing to friends and family is a major means of communication within the prison.
13. Similarly, some prisoners will refuse to take part, particularly if worried about the impact participation may have on their prison lives and appeals (see confidentiality concerns outlined below).
14. Although I could find no official rationale for this, I was told by various participants that this was due to security concerns – presumably it is too time-consuming for officers to read lengthy letters during the spot-check process.
15. All information provided was fully anonymised and personal details were protected throughout all stages of the research.
16. Although it is possible that participants formed their own views about these characteristics based on what little information they did have, i.e. the ‘typical’ Oxford researcher.

References
Alvesson M (2011) Interpreting Interviews. London: Sage Publications.
Anderson E (2002) The ideologically driven critique. American Journal of Sociology 107(6): 1533–1550.
Bochner AP (2001) Narrative’s virtues. Qualitative Inquiry 7(2): 131–57.
Bolton G (2003) Around the slices of herself. In: Etherington K (ed.) Narrative Study of Trauma, the Body and Transformation. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley: 121–137.
Bosworth M, Campbell D, Demby B, et al. (2005) Doing prison research: views from inside. Qualitative Enquiry 11(2): 249–264.
Bourdieu P and Wacquant L (1992) An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Connolly Baker K and Mazza N (2004) The healing power of writing: applying the expressive/creative component of poetry therapy. Journal of Poetry Therapy 17(3): 141–154.
Cooper GT (1997) Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
Dexter LA (2006) Elite and Specialized Interviewing. Colchester: ECPR Press.
Elizabeth V (2008) Another string to our bow: participant writing as research method. Qualitative Social Research 9(1): Art. 31.
Ellis C and Bochner AP (2000) Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as Subject. In: Denzin N and Lincoln Y (eds) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd edn. London: Sage Publications: 733–768.

Fontana A and Frey JH (2005) The interview: from neutral stance to political involvement. In: Denzin N and Lincoln Y (eds) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd edn, London: Sage Publications: 695–727.

Kehily MJ (1995) Self-narration, autobiography and identity. Construction, Gender and Education 7(1): 23–32.

Nelson E (2013) Writing as method: depth psychological research and archetypal voice. International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches 7(3): 330–342.

Neuman WL, Wiegrand B and Winterdyk JA (2004) Criminal Justice Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. Toronto: Pearson.

Noaks L and Wincup E (2004) Criminological Research: Understanding Qualitative Methods. London: Sage Publications.

Onyx J and Small J (2001) Memory-work: the method. Qualitative Inquiry 7(6): 773–86.

Penn P (2001) Chronic illness: trauma, language and writing: breaking the silence. Family Process 40(1): 33–52.

Pennebaker JW and Seagal JD (1999) Forming a story: the health benefits of narrative. Journal of Clinical Psychology 55(10): 1243–1254.

Pithouse-Morgan K, Khau M, Masinga L, et al. (2012) Letters to those who dare feel: using reflective letter-writing to explore the emotionality of research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods 11(1): 40–56.

Plummer G, Newman K and Winter R (1993) Exchanging letters: a format for collaborative action research? Educational Action Research 1(2): 305–14.

Portelli A (1981) The peculiarities of oral history. History Workshop Journal 12(1): 96–107.

Portelli A (2005) A dialogical relationship: an approach to oral history. Expressions Annual. Available at: http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf

Richardson L (2000) Writing as a method of inquiry. In: Denzin N and Lincoln Y (eds) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd edn. London: Sage Publications: 923–948.

Richardson L and Adams St. Pierre E (2005) Writing: a method of inquiry. In Denzin N and Lincoln Y (eds) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd edn. London: Sage Publications: 959–978.

Rubin HJ and Rubin IS (2012) Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data, 3rd edn, London: Sage Publications.

Smart C (2011) Families, secrets and memories. Sociology 45(4): 539–53.

Smyth JM and Greenberg MA (2000) Scriptotherapy: the effects of writing about traumatic events. In: Masling J and Duberstein P (eds) Psychodynamic Perspectives on Sickness and Health. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 121–164.

Yeasmin S and Rahman KF (2012) Triangulation research method as the tool of social science research. BUP Journal 1(1): 154–163.

Author biography

Emma Burtt is a recent DPhil graduate from the Centre of Criminology, University of Oxford and is a lecturer in law at the University of Brighton. Her DPhil research focuses on maintaining innocence in prison.