Intersectionality and Reflexivity: Narratives From a BME Female Researcher Inside the Hidden Social World of Prison Visits

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Abstract
This article examines the importance of intersectionality; and how this has been influential to analyzing my (the author’s) research journey as a Black Minority Ethnic (African and Asian descent) female researcher, using ethnographic approaches to collate data in three Scottish prisons. Intersectionality is a powerful tool to capture; and to interrogate the realities of fieldwork. It enables researchers to reflect on their social position, in response to the relational dynamics which occur in the field (Bochner, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Inspired by intersectional scholars, this paper will capture the nuances and complexities of the day to day realities in the field by exploring the importance of social identity. Furthermore, this paper will extend the discussion on social identity by analyzing the lived experiences and emotions occupied in certain spaces in the penal system; and how this has steered the narrative to collating data on the lived experiences of families of prisoners. This paper will capture the pleasantries, celebrations and complexities in conducting research in the waiting rooms of prisons by narrating on three themes: Power; Emotions in the field; and the Outsider within.

Keywords
autoethnography, critical feminist theory, ethnography, social justice, observational research

Introduction
Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to understand the oppressive mechanisms experienced by African American women. She argues that sexism and racism are inseparable, and that every woman’s experiences are unique and cannot be treated the same. The importance of intersectionality presents a deeper understanding on challenging oppressive and structural inequalities by documenting the individual’s social position (Castensen-Egwuom, 2014; Collins, 2012; Collins and Bilge, 2020; Locke, 2015). As Locke (2015) argues that intersectionality can be performed; and this performance is an ongoing process to engage in the “intersecting and reflexive relationship” (p. 179) between the researcher and the researched. However, there is still a gap in adopting an intersectional theory to understand the experiences of the researcher situated within the penal system, and further to this, focusing primarily on families of prisoners. This paper echoes Rice et al. (2019) argument and agree it is necessary to apply the fundamentals of intersectionality to understand the experiences in collecting data with families of prisoners.

Reflexivity and Prison Research
Intersectional theory has been absent in penology; and there has been little recognition to use intersectional practices to theorize authors reflections in conducting penal research. However, there has been some acknowledgment in using intersectionality to frame empirical findings on the experiences of families of prisoners (Adams & McCarthy, 2019; Christian, 2019). During 1950’s, the emergence of prison research started to immerse in the field of Sociology of Deviance; and the adoption of qualitative methods in conducting research on family life and the penal system, I advocate Rice et al. (2019) argument and agree it is necessary to apply the fundamentals of intersectionality to understand the experiences in collecting data with families of prisoners.

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prisons (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) started a significant discussion on the importance of seeking to understand the experiences of prisoners. Also, these scholars created a legacy for future research to collect data in prisons that is enrich and in-depth (Crewe, 2014; Liebling, 2014; Rowe, 2014). While these scholars (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) did not publicly reflect on their experiences in conducting such research, Crewe (2014) argues that if we look beneath the surface from these original texts, we can encounter the feelings and experiences documented by the authors. Many scholars including Comfort (2003) adopted Sykes (1958) “pain of imprisonment” to interrogate her experiences in conducting research on female relatives seeing their loved ones in prison. However, there was still little indication on how we can frame our analysis by adopting an intersectional approach to understand the multitude of themes that arise from conducting research in prisons.

So far, papers on reflexivity and prison have been able to capture a range of themes to understand the relationship with the researcher and the researched including: emotions (See, Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2014; Liebling, 2014); performance (See Sloan & Drake, 2013); and identity (See Moolman, 2015; Phillips & Earle, 2010; 2015; Rowe, 2014). Female scholars have examined their emotions in connection to their presence in the social field; and for many female penal scholars, emotions were unique and dependent on how they experienced their time within male establishments (See Jewkes, 2014; Sloan & Drake, 2013). For example, Sloan and Drake argues that we as researchers are mastering our feelings during our time in prison; and this could be considered as an emotional investment. She reflects on her two positions: “a sense of meaningless” (metaphor sense of sponge for other people’s pain) versus a “sense of mastery” (art of understanding the prison environment). This extensively contributes to researchers to reflect on their multiple selves in conducting research. Most importantly, we can also extend this debate further by exploring how social identity can influence Sloan and Drake’s positions by adopting an intersectional approach.

There have been a few scholars that have explored the intersection of race and gender as well as their professional identity; and how this has an impact on collecting data within the penal system (See Damsa & Uglevik, 2017; Moolman, 2015; Phillips & Earle, 2010; Rowe, 2014). For example, Phillips examined the power dynamics in conducting research with a White male; and the responses they both received. Phillips a Black academic, in a senior position reflected on her position as a Black woman, she was able to engage with ethnic minority prisoners, as there was a sense of relatedness. On the other hand, there were a series of episodes where she experienced forms of misogyny and micro aggressive racism projected by the prison officers (2010, 2015). Similarly, Moolman (2015) reflected on her social worker status intersected with her racial identity on being a Black woman in South Africa and conducting research in a prison. Further, Rowe (2014) reflected on her sexuality and her researcher status, in which, she spoke about the number of dilemmas to whether she should disclose her sexual identity; and the uncertainty of how one would react to this. Lastly, there has been a growing awareness in using reflexivity to engage to understanding the researcher’s social position on exploring families of prisoners (See Arditti et al., 2010; Comfort, 2003).

This paper will contribute to academic knowledge by adopting an intersectional approach to analyze the markers of social identity; and how this can be influential to the research journey. Reflecting on the analysis, this paper will contribute to the discussions of intersectionality by conceptualizing issues of social justice, power and inequalities as well as to understand on how I (as the researcher) will recognize and renegotiate the “working of power” (Rice et al., 2019, p. 412). To address these issues, this will draw on three themes: power; emotions in the field; and the outsider within. While I will advocate for more reflexivity in criminology, we must also be mindful that we need a balance of reflection and the importance of participants voices, as Crewe et al. (2014, p. 401) reminds us that “we are the least important person there,” and reflective writing should be an opportunity for researchers to learn from others on conducting research in the penal system.

**Intersectionality and Reflexivity**

As Bailey et al. (2019) argues that intersectional analysis works in tandem with social science methods “in terms of achieving the equality and justice seeking goals of intersectionality” (p. 10). Using intersectionality to frame qualitative research has enabled researchers to address the issues of oppression and subordination; and to acknowledge the matrix of power in society. Intersectionality has been rooted by Black feminism; and Black feminism has taught us as researchers to understand on how we (researchers and practitioners) should position the application of intersectional theory (Collins and Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Rice et al., 2019). Scholars (See Collins and Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989) argue that intersectionality can be situated as both critical inquiry and critical praxis. Therefore, intersectionality can be a theory to be applied in academic thinking as well a method to practice; and a form of promoting social activism—in other words—“doing justice” (Rice et al., 2019).

Theorizing intersectionality has enabled scholars to understand the use of power in terms of how relationships are constructed in the field. (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Collins, 2012; Grenz, 2005; Huysamen, 2018). For example, the power dynamics which are conflated between female researchers and male participants. There have been important debates on exploring the sexualization of female researchers by documenting their experiences of misogyny and sexual harassment perpetrated by participants or associates in the field (See Grenz, 2005; Huysamen, 2018). For example, Huysamen (2018) reflected on her experiences on conducting research on analyzing men who pay for sex, where she interviewed male participants. Male participants constructed narratives on what they considered to be masculine and feminine behavior, i.e. men being the superior and women the inferior body. While this occurred, she also found that there were many times she
experienced forms of misogynist behavior and being a victim to forms of aggression and harassment, where she felt she needed to perform to these specific situations by being “a right kind of femininity” (p. 10).

Previous research has applied intersectionality to connect emotions and social identity to construct a dialogue on the researchers’ experience. (See Arditti et al., 2010; Hordge-Freeman, 2018; Mollett & Faria, 2018). For example, Hordge-Freeman (2018) argues there is an important relationship with the body, emotions and identity, in which, are all key instruments to use to conduct research. Continuing, the author argues that emotions can be complex and are crucial in, either “play in directing and/or derailing the researcher” (p. 6). This is an interesting observation, as it insinuates the researcher has agency that will likely influence the landscape of the research. As mentioned, female scholars have explored the purpose of emotions by adopting an intersectional approach (See Blee, 2017; Caretta & Jokinen, 2017). For example, Caretta and Jokinen (2017) framed their position from an intersectional lens to understand the emotions experienced during their time in the field. The authors reflect on their identity as being European and are White females situated in the Global South to conduct research. Further, the authors describe their experiences as “gendered-specific challenges” within the field, in which, they highlight that they were aware of their privileges in the context to being White and European as well as being associated to a university institution. However, they were also aware of feeling a sense of vulnerability due to being young and female. This led to many complexities in developing social relationships with participants.

Intersectionality has enabled researchers to conceptualize their insider/outside status (See Bowleg, 2013; Brown, 2012; Merriam et al., 2001). For example, Brown reflected on her identity as an African American woman and how she interacted with African American legislators, in which, she found she had to continuously negotiate her insider and outsider status. Her racial identity was inherent and was a means to build and sustain relationships both in the field and in academia. She reflected on her experiences by drawing on Collins (1990) Black epistemology, in which, she experiences several challenges in continuously having to re-validate her research as well as her sense of worth to White colleagues in academia. Furthermore, Couture et al. (2012) argues that the dichotomy of the insider/outside status is not as polarized and can overlap, as identities are often multifaceted and complex. The breadth of literature on intersectionality has created a platform for me to be inspired to write this reflective paper on my fieldwork in conducting research in prison waiting and visiting rooms. By acknowledging the fundamentals of intersectionality and reflexivity, this paper will contribute to understanding markers of social identity in the penal field.

**Context to My Fieldwork**

All three prisons were based in Scotland, and all three prisons had a male and female population. My sample was comprised of family members, including partners, grandparents, and parents of adult children who are imprisoned. For this paper, I will be drawing on the observations and informal narratives and I will use the field notes that have captured my experiences of my observations in the waiting room to facilitate my discussion on reflexivity. To ensure anonymity, I chose to use pseudonyms for each prison I visited, using fictional prison names derived from films and TV programmes. Using an ethnographic approach, researchers are confronted to consider their social position with themselves and their participants. Adopting an intersectional approach, ethnographers can reflect on how their identity is shaped by the encounters within the field.

**My Journey**

**Power**

The recognition of power has been central in adopting an intersectional approach; as academics need to recognize how power is used and the dynamics that have occurred during the research process (Collins and Bilge, 2020; Rice et al., 2019). Intersectionality locates power in many dimensions from the macro to the micro relationships that occur in the field. Indeed, intersectionality has enabled me to analyze and draw on my racial and gendered identity that I have continually reflected on whether this has empowered or hindered my research. Walking in to the prison for the first time was a culture shock-in some sense—it was a hidden space—due to the many barriers that needed to be accessed before entry. This included the scrupulous ethical process from the application of the university ethics to the prison service; and then negotiating access with the gatekeepers in the penal system. As an outsider—I felt I stood out and estranged within this social world. The feeling of “being a stranger” was expressed significantly in the waiting room; and these times were noted at HMP Teddington. Sloan and Drake (2013) argues that as researchers, we create multiple selves-in which—she ascribed oneself as being a “sense of mastery”—understanding the prison environment. Most of the prison officers and families of prisoners were White; and many of the families were from working class backgrounds. While I am an ethnic minority and female, I recognize that I hold a certain amount of privilege by growing up in a middle-class household. Furthermore, my privilege is also exercised by being associated to a university and having the opportunity to study for a PhD. As a result, I was aware of the power differences between myself and my participants. This is exemplified, during the first visit at HMP Teddington, I observed certain spaces in the prison; and oddly I found the ladies toilet as a protective space before I went to speak to families in the waiting room. My intersections—female, ethnic minority and from London, I started to feel my insecurities intensify, and feelings of being the lone stranger emerged. This has been exemplified in an incident that led to me confronting my own identity due to racist connotations from a prisoner.
I went into the visiting room and was able to sit with some of the visitors. I sat for most of the visiting session with a mother and father as well as their son (a 52-year-old man, who was imprisoned). I started to speak about how he spent his time in the prison. Whilst in the visit, the parents were very generous and offered me tea. The family were very open about their experiences of being parents of a son that had a drug addiction, who was consistently in and out of prison. The topic of conversation led to them speaking about trying to organise their son’s clothes, such as collecting it from his home to send on. He started to rant about some of the other prisoners who were from an ethnic minority background, and he was not happy with who he was sharing a cell. He was swearing . . . with the use of fuck this and fuck that. This led on to a venting using racist slurs. I was very taken back, and the family was very embarrassed and said calmly to him he should not use this type of language, especially in front of a lady. The prisoner shrugged it off and went back to his conversation . . . (Field notes, HMP Teddington, 30th April)

While we can argue that the prisoner was not directing this racist language toward me, however, the lack of awareness on how I felt hearing this as an ethnic minority female led to this feeling of being positioned as the other. It was also interesting that the parents of the prisoners identified that the language was inappropriate but spoke about this being offensive due to my gender and not my race. I questioned whether the parents of the prisoner perceived this language as ‘racist,’ or the use of the word ‘fuck’ as being more offensive, without recognizing that the tone and language was filled with racial hatred. Interestingly, this observation also led to conversations associated to the intersections of gender, race and social class. For example, the use of ‘lady’ directed from parents may indicate assumptions made around class differences; and to somewhat position me in a higher status. Furthermore, the prisoner’s racial connotations were intensified in a space, where I am essentially an outsider, but from the view of others—‘an intruder.’ Further to this, the conceptualization of power can be discussed in relation to myself and the male prisoner. Even though he was imprisoned, I felt inferior and without power, as a response to this language. As an outsider, I found it difficult to challenge, such behavior rather I responded with silence; and to a degree of embarrassment.

Similarly, these micro-forms of aggression are nothing new to other research, in which, other female scholars (See Damsa & Ugлевик, 2017; Moolman, 2015; Phillips & Earle, 2010) have identified the constant feelings of inferiority among male prisoners; and the experience of being victim to misogynist and racist language imposed by males in prison. Researchers have been able to use intersectionality to challenge and question on how power is continuously negotiated in male dominated institutions (See Caretta & Joinken, 2017; Cartensen-Egwuom, 2014). For example, my position as an ethnic minority female researcher; being subjected to the sexualization of prison officers; and experience forms of daily misogyny. Sexualization of female researchers were not uncommon, in fact, Phillips documented that some of the male participants would try exerting authority by flirting with her and seeing her as a sexualized being (Phillips & Earle, 2010). I did find myself on two occasions being quite taken back by the prison officers’ attitudes toward me and how I dressed.

As I was leaving HMP Teddington, I would always have to sign out and hand back my key to the prison officers at the front. The reception desk was protected by glass, which visitors had to perch down to speak to officers. As I approached the desk, one of the prison officers shouted out if I would like to go on a date with him and go for a drink. All the other male prison officers were chuckling, I was thrown off by this and I was very embarrassed and quite insulted. He did not take me seriously but saw me as a prop in his banter with the other male prison officers. I didn’t respond, instead, I tried to give as little eye contact, collect my valuables and swiftly left the prison. (Field notes, HMP Teddington, 2nd May)

I organized a meeting with a male in a senior position manager at HMP Shawshank, who would help to facilitate with the logistics of my fieldwork. As I was speaking about the logistics of my research, he interjected to tell me how good looking my boots were. I was put on edge as I felt he was not taking my research seriously, and he was, in fact, belittling my project and was using what I had worn to distract the conversation from my research. I felt uncomfortable but also felt objectified that he would sexualize me in a professional environment which left me with an unproductive feeling toward my research. (Field notes, HMP Shawshank 6th November).

The concept of intersectionality has led to an “entanglement of multiple axes of differentiation—economic, cultural and political” (Cartensen-Egwuom, 2014, p. 268); and therefore, both dialogues were influenced by my multiple layers of intersections-female, ethnic minority, researcher, having a London accent. In the second conversation, the officer treated me as a sexual object by using my boots as a basis to flirt. In terms of intersectionality, we can observe this from a position of gender and race, however, there also seems to be an implicit acceptance for male officers to engage in “banter” and flirtation, due to my outsider status. Further, Martynuska (2016) uses the connotation as “exotic” to exemplify the inferior treatment women of color experience in mostly in male dominated institutions. This feeling of being subjected as “exotic” had taken away the seriousness of this research; and resulted me to feel inferior and marked as the “other” (Martynuska, 2016; Moolman, 2015). It left me feeling disappointed with myself and angry that this would not have happened if I was an older White man. Similarly, I questioned on whether I should have responded and challenged these two males in my study, but out of fear I chose not to, as this may have hindered my research and perhaps left me to fend for myself in my setting. The sexualized tone of both prison officers’ attitudes made me feel inadequate, and I ended up feeling a sense of betrayal because if this was another situation, such as personal circumstances outside of the prison, I would have adopted an opposing stance toward such misogynist behavior. However, this behavior is assumed to be common in a male dominated institution; and feelings of being sexualized can be marked as a
factor of oppression especially for women of color (See Collins, 1990; Matynuska, 2016).

The intersections of being a female were prominent to building relationships with female relatives in male dominated settings. However, there were nuances to my identity which contributed to building trust with family members. For example, I was an older sister that was protective of my two siblings; and I was in a committed to a long distant relationship, where I could only see my partner once or twice a month. While these are not directly related to the experiences of families, these factors interplay with similar traits by relatives in adopting a caring and protecting role; and feeling the absence of a partner from the home.

Much of the discussion with female relatives were based about their lives outside of the prison. I also found myself becoming emotionally involved; and there were times I found myself craving for their trust and acceptance. This form of acceptance was about them appreciating my research but to also gage in a mutual respect. This was demonstrated in HMP Toluca, where I found the green comfortable sofas in the corner of the waiting room often being used by the same mothers of the children’s visits.

One afternoon, I started to interact with the mothers from the green sofa. Karen’s son was running around near and wanted me to play. Karen was distracted from speaking to someone else. She would often look over to see what her son was doing. However, the periods that she was distracted, her son would be jumping on the sofa and playing with the plants. I did feel obliged to watch over him and ensure he would not hurt himself; and I did become a somewhat of a “temporary babysitter.” (Field notes, HMP Toluca 13th October)

This quote illustrates that need to go beyond my researcher’s role; and to adopt aspects of my protective older sister role. These traits enabled families to trust me to temporarily look after their children in the waiting room (Arditti et al., 2010; Comfort, 2003); and the role as a protector was extended to listening to the relatives’ stories. Most importantly, I have been able renegotiate my role as a researcher; and to perform other roles like a carer or my role as a partner. These all interplayed with other parts of my identity; and having a dedicated interest in to understanding the lives of families of prisoners. Intersectoral analysis has enabled me to understand the power that existed but at many times were not always visible, i.e. sexualized remarks. At times, I found the nuances that interplay with being female contributed to an equal playing field with female relatives; and at the same time disparaged by male prison officers. Power can also be linked further with the discussion on understanding the emotions that arise in the field.

Emotions in the Field

Intersectional feminists drew on emotions to understand how women of color constructed their experiences to the responses identified in the field (See Best, 2003; Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Caretta & Joinken, 2017; McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Emotions are critical in analyzing the roles performed; challenges; and the celebrations occurred in conducting fieldwork. As Caretta and Joinken (2017) argue that it is important to consider the emotional encounters every day in the field; and how this is influenced by the researcher’s position. It is important to contribute one step further, by exploring on how emotions can differ depending on the penal space you are situated in. For example, Laws (2016) argued that men in prison are likely to suppress emotions of care and affection to protect themselves from other men in prison. We can extend this argument by recognizing that the waiting and visiting room are likely to produce distinct emotions in the context to visiting a loved one including happiness and affection. However, many families described the intensity of being searched, the waiting periods and the excessive prison rules (See Comfort, 2003).

Adopting an intersectional approach, vulnerability is significant to understand my social identity in connection with the social world. As Caretta and Jokinen (2016) argues that emotional vulnerability is embodied within the field; and as researchers, we are vulnerable to how others react to this. Our vulnerability is intertwined with the multiple positions that we immerse ourselves with in the social world. In relation to this, the feelings of engagement and empathy were driven by the multiple reactions from my participants. As Ballamingie and Johnson (2011, p. 712) describes this as “unexpected professional vulnerability”; this was pivotal in expressing the feelings of fear during my time in in the research field. Intersectionality enables researchers to be confident in writing about vulnerability; and how this is situated in the context to the field. This was documented at HMP Shawshank:

After coming back off from a distressful Christmas holiday, I went straight back into my fieldwork at HMP Shawshank, which was one of the hardest prisons to conduct my fieldwork. Whilst it was the hardest, there was often a sense of excitement, where I was shutting off from the outside world for a few hours. HMP Shawshank was a Victorian style prison. The waiting room was bleak. This was mostly because of the working conditions within the waiting room which had no windows, there was hot air blowing out of the air conditioning, and the room is filled with metal benches. At times, there would be no one in the prison waiting room with no volunteers on shift and prison officers kept their distance. I would patiently wait during the long breaks in between visits . . . (Field notes, HMP Shawshank, 5th Jan)

Fear has been a significant emotion in this research; the role of fear was intertwined with the excessive regulations and rules imposed by the prisons. The sense of fear ignited with the many interactions with prison officers at the beginning of the research. Fear was apparent when speaking to some of the visitors for the first time in the prison. Lastly, fear was re-examined through the process of being rejected. Rejection was exemplified with some of the encounters with families’ objection to not speaking to me; mistaking me for a social worker or police officer or giving me the wrong phone numbers. All of
these examples made me feel exposed as an ethnic minority female and a stranger to the field. Fear was also experienced by family members due to my presence as a female ethnic researcher that interacted with prison officers, wore a lanyard; and were able to cross over to other spaces that were not privy to families including access to the Family Contact officer workspace. For many families, my presence led to feelings of anxiety, weariness but also curiosity. This exemplified at HMP Toluca. On my first visits at HMP Toluca, I spoke to a young woman in the waiting room; I formally introduced myself and the reasons for being there. She explained her situation of having a partner in prison and being pregnant. The next day, one of the female prison officers pulled to me one side to tell me, this lady felt quite uneasy speaking to me, she assumed I was a social worker. I profusely apologized to the officer and was slightly embarrassed, but also fearful that developing relationships with other families may be difficult.

However, I also noted that my feelings of trust with female relatives were more fluid than with male prison officers. In conducting this research, I experienced feelings of empathy and comfort with some of the detailed conversations I had with the female relatives. This was provoked by conversation I had with a woman that gave me a hug every time she saw me, and after she opened about her situation with her partner and children. Her story was an important contribution to understanding the effects of incarceration, such as the process of waiting for her partner to write letters as an important way to maintain their relationships (See Christian, 2005; Christian et al., 2006; Moran et al., 2017).

...She said it is hard and that she must spend her time getting on public transport. She was puzzled as to why her partner was not sending her letters. She was adamant that her partner used to send her letters to Shawshank prison, but said: “You know what? I know why he used to send me letters. He sent me these letters because he was locked up more at Shawshank.” She explained to me the importance of receiving a letter and how nice it is when he does write. She continued: “I think I will let him know how I feel, as I would like a letter from him”... She continued to speak about her children and her view that social service had interfered and has taken them off her because social services think they are at risk due to her partner. ........ She explained to me that it is hard to put on a happy face—making gestures with her smile—but having to deal with everything on the outside. She started to talk about how she blamed her ex-partner for her kids being taken away from her. Tears started to well up in her eyes, so I tried to change the subject.... After, she sat up and gave me a hug. An unexpected hug, but it was a sign of relief that she was able to get this all off her chest. (Field notes, HMP Toluca 15th October)

Adopting an intersectional approach enabled me to understand the connection with feelings and power, similarly, to Carstensen-Egwuom (2014), she argued that her fieldnotes is a co-production of knowledge by interrogating the relationships, emotions and the power observed in the social field. My emotions documented allowed me to co-produce my knowledge that was central to conceptualizing the space I was present in. I became attuned to my participants’ experiences, and at the same time, added value to academic knowledge on the multiple positions constructed that enabled me to immerse myself in this type of environment. These multiple positions were adopting roles that contributed to my ethnic, female and researcher identity. This included: the protector; the carer; the listener; as well as trying to move beyond the assumptions of being a social worker. Overall, these forms of conversations helped me to reflect on whether I was considered as an insider or an outsider in a social world and to be aware of the boundaries that existed between myself and the families.

The Outsider Within

Scholars have usedintersectionality to explore the positionality of the researcher on being an insider to an outsider, and the the implications this has on research (See Brown, 2012; Couture et al., 2012). Intersectionality presents a deeper understanding on identities; and how this can negotiate the insider-outsider dichotomy (See Couture et al., 2012). Intersectional feminists (Brown, 2012; Collins, 2012; Collins and Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989) argue that women of color who enter White male dominated institutions, are treated unequal by omission, in which, “they are not afforded the full rights and privileges in hierarchical and cultural structures controlled by the insider group” (Brown, 2012, p. 21). During my interactions with senior members and prison officers, there were many instances of microaggressions of racism and sexism; and in the context to the interactions to prison officials that reinforced my outsider status of not belonging. In discussion, Couture et al. (2012) states it is hard to reaffirm on the insider/outsider dichotomies due to the complexity of multiple identities that are interplayed. These intricate issues played out in my time on the field. The implications of being an outsider was reinforced through materials including the use of an official visitor badge, as well as carrying my notepad and consent forms around with me, and the continuous dialogue with the family contact officers and other prison officers, who started to know me because I attended often. This did create a power division between the families of prisoners and me.

Prison officers, mostly at HMP Toluca, would often offer me coffee and tea in front of the families. This started to be the norm, as I felt it would be rude to reject, and, also, it was quite comforting having a cup of tea while doing my fieldwork. This did feel quite strange at times, where families would see that I was friendly with the prison officers, and sometimes would mistake me as working for the prison. However, this was not always the case. There were benefits to be an outsider as many would often be curious as to what my intentions were, including where I was studying. Often, some of the participants were quite puzzled as to why I was conducting this type of research.

As an example, many of the participants would ask repeatedly: “So you are just going to sit in the waiting room and speak to families? You do this twice a week, dear?” Being an outsider meant I also had to take on the “naïve researcher” role. This
meant that families would often feel a need to take me in and feel sorry for me, for not knowing much, and, also, for being a “poor student.” This was often seen when I conducted interviews in coffee shops. Many of the participants (usually mothers) would offer to buy me cakes and coffee, where it was assumed that my status as a student meant I was lacking in funds: which was partially true. However, I started to feel in conflict about saying “yes.” As a researcher, I felt obliged to pay for tea and cake, because they are participating in my research, but at the same time, I did not want to offend their kind offer, and would often sheepishly say “yes.”

Also, the “naïve researcher” role enabled participants to see my outsider status as being ignorant of the prison system. I was asked by many of the families on many occasions “how my dissertation was going” and was also given advice about going to the prison, or how the prison was run. The need for families to draw to their own conclusions that I was doing a dissertation rather than a funded PhD research started to lead to questions about my formal status. There were many questions that families mirrored to me to an undergraduate student due to the intersections of being young, female and an ethnic minority. Either way, there was a tendency to categorize me as the naïve researcher that has a sense of ignorance to the system. My female identity was a source of presenting opportunities, in which, has enabled me to explore further insights in to families’ home life beyond the prison. However, I was also identified as an outsider due to the level of access I pertained to entering the prison institution (See Ergun & Erdemir, 2009; Phillips & Earle, 2010; Rowe, 2014). Similarly, to Comfort (2003), I started to immerse myself in the waiting room to be a part of the visiting community. As Sloan and Drake (2013) argued there were times I started to master a performance to re negotiate my role in research—I adopted roles including: a “friend,” “support worker” or even another family member.

...I went up to a lady who was from the Highlands. She said she spent three and a half hours travelling. She was really frustrated and quite hesitant as to why her son was transferred here. I didn’t want to ask any more questions, as this was her first time here and the journey of emotions experience before—arriving a new prison, for me it was important to not make this even more anxious. After five minutes, people were going straight in and it was rushing to go through. Then the same lady who I spoke to came out of the waiting room a bit flustered. She asked if I could keep a ten-pound note. For me, there were alarm bells going as I did not want to hold on to personal belongings. But at the same time, I felt quite happy—in a weird sense—that this lady trusted me with her personal belongings. However, this put me in an unethical position, so I alerted the family contact officer, as there was an overwhelming feeling that this could go wrong. (Field notes, HMP Toluca, 29th October)

Trying to weave between the outsider to the insider—I started to adopt to roles that would accommodate the “babysitter,” similar to Comfort’s (2003) reflections. I tried to be flexible when negotiating roles that adopted to build trust with my participants. There were many examples of mothers placing their trust in me, i.e. looking after their children for temporarily period. However, for the above quote, there were also questions about being in a vulnerable situation, where I found myself looking after someone’s personal belongings. At the same time, my status as a researcher assumed certain level of power, in which, this woman trusted me due to being associated to an authority figure. Lastly, this was captured in this example, in which my identity as a young female in companion with other females.

One afternoon in the waiting room...I was amongst a few female visitors in the waiting room. We were sitting on the green seats as they were waiting to see their loved ones. One of the visitors was very stressed out due to not being able to bring her son’s trainers. Aside from this, one of the women started to speak to me about shaping her eyebrows. On the outside, this seemed to be a pointless and mundane conversation, however, in the confinement of the prison, this conversation was meaningful and a way to connect all the women in the visiting room. It was also a sense of feeling like one of them... I was no longer a female researcher rather for a split second I was just a young woman who threaded her eyebrows and could add to the conversations on the importance of shaping your brows. They watched whilst I used hand gestures to describe threading and the other women interrupted with their own techniques of shaping eyebrows. In fact, speaking about how we all shaped our eyebrows, did improve the atmosphere, and it wasn’t just about seeing these women as families of prisoners (Field notes, HMP Toluca, 8th December)

Conclusion

Reflexivity can be described as a “chaotic process,” however, this paper has tried to unscramble the messiness from my fieldnotes to tell a story that will add value to the intended fieldwork. To echo Crewe et al. (2014), reflexivity should be a learning opportunity for researchers to understand their presence within the field. Therefore, this paper has drawn on the extensive literature demarcated from previous reflections from penal research (Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2014; Moolman, 2015; Rowe, 2014; Sloan & Drake, 2013), in this, there have been significant contributions to add to this paper on understanding issues surrounding social identity and emotions.

This is the only article to use intersectionality as a theoretical tool to analyze the fundamental practices in penal research, in context to families of prisoners. Intersectionality has been used as a methodological tool to understand and conceptualize power, emotions and the outsider within, to explore specific spaces in the prison. Influenced by intersectionality, I argue that my identity-based characteristics are embedded with one another and cannot exist alone. Intersectionality has also taught me that power is a relationship and cannot exist alone (Collins and Bilge, 2020). In contribution, this paper explores on how we can conceptualize the use of power exercised to document the range of relationships with actors in the social world, for example, the relationships that existed with prison...
officers, prisoners and families of prisoners. Further, I argue that reflexivity has contributed to qualitative research by challenging the structures in prison that exercise forms of both macro and micro examples of power.

In line with these findings, Rice et al. (2019) argues that reflexivity enables researchers to disrupt the process to challenge power relations in the field; as well we-the researchers—have a greater recognition to understand dynamics between the participant and researcher. Similarly, this paper has contributed to Rice et al. (2019) to question on the use of authority that has been exercised in interactions with both male prisoners to prison officers; and how these dynamics led to instances of me—feeling inferior. Adopting an intersectional approach, I have been able to recognize how my position influenced the field as well as “to discover the boundaries of and silence surrounding a topic” (p. 415). The silence of being mistreated; sexualized; and racialized have been a focal point to my experiences in conducting research on families of prisoners. Intersectional approach has given me the space to understand how sexualization of women of color can be conceptualized as a form of oppression (See Martynuska, 2016).

Previous literature has documented the interconnectedness of emotions and gender in conducting research in prisons (See, Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2014; Liebling, 2014; Collins and Bilge, 2020), however, there has been no recognition on adopting an intersectional approach to reflect on the author’s experiences to contribute to wider discussions on social issues and institutions (Collins and Bilge, 2020). However, I fulfill this dialogue by analyzing how emotions can be experienced in response to markers of identity and the space occupied. In applying an intersectional approach (See Blee, 2017; Caretta & Jokinen, 2017; Hordge-Freeman, 2018), this paper has articulated on how vulnerability can be significant to understanding my experiences in engaging with actors from the penal system. As Ballamingie and Johnson (2011) argued that researchers engage in a form of “professional vulnerability”; similarly, I found that vulnerability for me was about tapping into the conversations with participants, which can be highly emotive and sensitive. Similarly, to Caretta and Jokinen (2017) argued that vulnerability and privilege can be intertwined; and it is important for researchers to recognize and reflect on this engagement. This paper argues that vulnerability stemmed from the intersections of my gender and race; and being a researcher at the time of collecting data. However, I have recognized that my privilege comes from being able to voice my experiences in a format of a published article in the landscape of academia. While we can argue we temporarily enter the field, it is still important to acknowledge these feelings are still poignant today.

Following on, the last theme has been the “outsider within,” in which, to understand the experiences of my identity as an outsider; and how I have integrated within the penal environment. Conceptualizing the use of hanging around has been an important part of reflecting the experiences of an ethnographic researcher (See Brown, 2012; Comfort, 2003). However, scholars such as Brown (2012), presents a closer insight in to the insider-outsider dichotomy from gendered and racial perspective. Like Brown (2012), the identity of myself influenced how much I was accepted in the field. Upon reflection, experiences of being victim to misogyny and racism, led to being continuously reminded of my outside status. I found myself adopting multiple positions in the field, in which, I was continuously negotiating my intersectional identity. Furthermore, my gendered identity intersected with my professional position that often altered my interactions with participants. As a female researcher, I had the privilege and opportunity to access spaces that were guarded by processes and systems of security and surveillance, in which, may have hindered families being open with me. Yet, at the same time, my identity as a female allowed me to connect emotionally with mothers and grandmothers, who were then able to be open and honest during a time, and in a space, that was dominated by high tensions. This dichotomy of insider-outsider was a continuous process, in which, there were episodes of celebrations as well as exhaustion.

This research has contributed significantly with adopting an intersectional approach as an analytical tool to conceptualize, power, emotions and the insider to outsider dichotomy to explore my journey in conducting research with families of prisoners. I will advocate for future research, to continue these conversations in a space that is safe and productive; and to create a platform for early career researchers, in particular women, ethnic and sexual minorities to voice their experiences in fields which can often be heavily dominated by inequality, oppressive as well very isolating spaces.

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