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# Prison Research from the Inside: The Role of Convict Autoethnography

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## **Introduction**

In her article, "Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources," published in this journal in 2011, Yvonne Jewkes discusses the emotional dilemmas that many prison researchers face when

gathering first-hand information about prisons and prisoners. Although, in our opinion, good research should endeavor to be fair and impartial – if not actually value-free – ethnographers inevitably encounter problems when faced with emotionally provocative contexts involving human suffering or injustice. How, for example, does one maintain objective neutrality when dealing with situations like genocide or concentration camps, which are repugnant to common human sensibility? (See, e.g., Abel, 1951; Adler, 1958; Bettelheim, 1943; Bloch, 1947; Bondy, 1943; Jackman, 1958; Kogon, 1958). Is emotional neutrality in such situations even desirable?

Albeit to a somewhat lesser extent, modern prison ethnographers face similar situations. Here, the investigator is working in a stressful environment consisting of two antagonistic groups - inmates and correctional workers - both of which have perspectives that can be irreconcilable with one another. The self-concepts of prison officers as aggrieved and maligned may be as justifiable as those of prisoners as deprived and oppressed. Often underpaid and working in a routinely uninspiring but sometimes dangerous authoritarian environment, officers easily become embittered and vindictive towards the men and women they supervise. Dealing day-to-day with prisoners who are sometimes rude, recalcitrant, exploitive, deceitful, abusive or assaultive, affects the culture and the working mentality of the prison officer (Goffman, 1961; Hawkins, 1976; McCorkle, 1970; McCorkle & Korn, 1970; Morris & Morris, 1963; Napier, 2007; Thomas, 1972; Weinberg, 1942). Prisoners, on the other hand, whose world is perhaps even less inspiring, and more frustrating, dangerous and authoritarian than that of officers, develop a corresponding image of officers as petty, vindictive, autocratic, antipathetic and unreasonable (Hawkins, 1976; McCorkle, 1970; Rasmussen, 1940; Ross & Richards, 2002; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Weinberg, 1942). Like the perceptions of right and wrong among warring marriage partners, the perspectives of prison officers and inmates can be totally at odds.

In prison research, becoming emotionally attached to one side or the other is not unusual, but doing so affects the perceptions of the researcher. Jewkes herself recounts the empathy she felt after getting to know a prisoner called Harry Roberts, then in the 33rd year of a life sentence for murdering three policemen in 1966. Her reaction here is

understandable. Roberts was apparently personable and intelligent, and no doubt a much changed man from the angry youth he must have been on that fatal day in 1966. Had Jewkes been personally acquainted with any of the three policemen that Roberts shot, however, her emotional reaction may have been different. This interpretation is underscored by the antagonism Jewkes experienced from a group of lawyers at Oxford University. The lawyers thought she was focusing too much on criminals and ignoring the rights of victims. Thus, the impact of emotional empathy on the objectivity of an observer is highlighted.

This is not to denigrate the validity of her point. Roberts had a tale to tell and the story of his life was of personal tragedy. The pointlessness and injustice of keeping him locked up for the rest of his life is arguably as pointless and unjust as the crimes he committed. As in the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant, criminal justice is a many-faceted beast which can be described differently depending on a person's position. One perspective that has often been absent in criminal justice research, though, is that of former prisoners. Numerous first-hand accounts of prison life have been written but until recently, accredited research from former prisoners equipped with higher degrees has been rare. After 1997 this began to change following the formation of a group of criminologists with experience of incarceration or of working with criminals in prisons. These scholars have begun producing research that is informed by their experiences of crime and the criminal justice process. The purpose of this paper is briefly to review the emergence of this 'convict criminology' group, to describe some of its work and, using Jewkes as a springboard, to discuss matters such as subjectivity, emotionalism and partiality which are often a controversial component of this type of analysis.

Hayano (1979), on the subject of auto-ethnography generally and Jones (1995), on prisons in particular, have recognized the problem of maintaining objectivity in auto-ethnographic research, but both argue that the advantages of subjective observation outweigh the possible limitations. Yuen (2011, p.75) takes an even stronger view and argues that emotions can enrich and deepen researchers' understanding of what they are studying. Likewise Jewkes (2011, p.72) persuades us that emotionalism and subjective experience

deserve a role in the formulation of knowledge because, she says, they “deepen our understanding of the people and contexts we study.” Thus, she “discusses the work of a small minority of ethnographers who acknowledge the emotional content of prison studies,” and urges that “a more frank acknowledgement of the convergence of subject-object roles does not necessarily threaten the validity of social science” (p.63). With this we fully agree. One of the weaknesses of outsider research is that it analyzes crime from the sterile viewpoint of the middle class academic. Ignoring the cultural and environmental contexts in which it occurs, criminal behaviour is often equated with individual pathology. In the introduction to their edited book on doing fieldwork with deviant subcultures Ferrell & Hamm (1998, p.10) observe, “As a wealth of fieldwork has demonstrated...research methods which stand outside the lived experience of deviance or criminality can perhaps sketch a faint outline of it, but they can never fill that outline with essential dimensions of meaningful understanding”.

Jewkes’ article is primarily about the predicaments of academics working in the unfamiliar and potentially hostile environment of the prison. Some, such as Hayner & Ash (1939; 1940), have actually entered prison briefly as voluntary inmates while others, like Marquart (1986), have been voluntary staff members. But the majority of ethnographers have conducted surveys of prisoners and/or staff from the outside (for a discussion of such work, see Jones, 1995). The problem inherent in this kind of research is that any specific role that is held, negotiated or assumed by an investigator must affect his/her access to, and interpretation of, the data collected. In all such situations, therefore, the same questions arise. How does an outsider prevent emotional responses (e.g., empathy, embarrassment, fear, nervousness) from coloring his/her objectivity? How does someone from the academy gain the confidence of men and women who tend to look at representatives of the ‘establishment’ with suspicion? How does an investigator assess the truth or validity of what is being said? How can researchers from relatively protected, middle class backgrounds be sure that they are accurately interpreting the world of people whose culture and biographies are dramatically different from their own?

Another cogent concern for academic ethnographers is the restrictions imposed by officialdom. Gaining access to prison is difficult and if granted is likely to be highly conditional. Although existing literature confirms that social scientists have managed to access prisons with some regularity, they have typically done so under closely negotiated circumstances (Peak, 1985; Unnithan, 1986; Farkas, 1992). Zwerman & Gardner (1986) consider the matter of possible state intrusion into the investigative process – what happens, for example, if the authorities attempt to define the nature of study or demand access to research data? Linked to this are ethical and practical considerations of confidentiality and the vulnerability of inmate subjects. Silberman (1995) considers a number of these, including prisoner concerns about the impact that any information given may have on institutional policy or release chances. These matters may affect their responses and impugn the validity of the findings.

Some of the issues surrounding confidentiality can be overcome by using anonymous surveys, which have an advantage of allowing large amounts of information to be collected from inmates as well as staff (e.g., Garabedian, 1963; Wheeler, 1961). Although surveys have contributed valuable knowledge they also have limitations, including a tendency to focus on matters of administrative concern (Fleisher, 1989). Moreover, the preconceptualized and prestructured nature of survey instruments is not conducive to an understanding about everyday life in prisons, and sometimes profoundly distorts it (Irwin, 1987). Those without insider knowledge of prisoner culture, language, idiom and nuance, can easily misconstrue responses to surveys or interview questions (for an exception using inmate interpretation see Winfree, Newbold & Tubb, 2002).

An approach which to date has remained largely unexplored in the literature is that which involves academics originating from inside the correctional cordon. These researchers generally comprise men and women who either have served time themselves or who have operated alongside prisoners as professionals in custodial settings. Such scholars face similar dilemmas to outsiders in terms of emotionalism, although the emotions are of a somewhat different nature. For the ex-prisoner, the contaminating potential of hyper-

emotionalism lies in passions such as frustration, resentment and perceived injustice, which can be considerable and sometimes consuming, and which can compromise objectivity. Jewkes validly points out that the existence of emotion does not necessarily invalidate an 'insider' criminologist's views. Rather, the passion engendered by the experience of incarceration can add color, context and contour both to objective and subjective findings. Provided it does not unrealistically skew the researcher's perception or analysis, insider input may therefore be regarded as an essential thread in the tapestry of criminological inquiry.

Although still relatively new in the criminological field, there is a cadre of scholars emerging today who write from a background of imprisonment or of working with prisoners, and who employ their experiences as a part of their epistemology. Although not all have actually done time themselves, they refer to themselves loosely as 'convict criminologists' (see, e.g., Richards & Ross, 2001; Ross & Richards, 2003). The broad objective of the convict criminologists is to explore a new horizon in criminological understanding, particularly with regard to prisons. The approach is often reflexively auto-ethnographic, although it is not necessarily so. Sometimes a grounded theory approach, using surveys supplemented by ethnographic analysis, is used (see, eg, Winfree, Newbold & Tubb, 2002). Whether subjective or objective, however, the views and interpretations of members are inevitably affected by the experiences, knowledge and *verstehen* derived from years of living with, and among, criminals and inmates.

## **Background**

Use of the ethnographic method dates right back to the roots of American sociology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Vidich & Lyman, 1994), but apart from the concentration camp literature (e.g., Bettelheim, 1943; Bondy, 1943; Kogon, 1958), scholarly observation from former prisoners has not featured highly in criminological literature. Although not widely known, Frank Tannenbaum, author of the influential book *Crime and the Community* (1938) and a former labor organizer, served a year in prison and went on to become a successful journalist and subsequently a professor at Columbia University, NY. His concept of

the 'dramatization of evil' through the 'tagging' of young delinquents was an important precursor to labelling theory and was partially inspired by his own reflections on life as a former inmate. A more recent ex-convict scholar is Richard McCleary. McCleary served time in both state and federal US prisons and published his first book, *Dangerous Men*, in 1978 while on parole in Minnesota. McCleary went on to develop a distinguished career at the University of California-Irvine (see Newbold, Ross & Richards, 2010).

One of the most celebrated and, from the point of view of convict criminology, the most important convict-academic, is John Irwin (Richards, 2009). Irwin, who died in January 2010 (Richards, Austin, Owen, & Ross, 2010), was a former heroin addict who in the mid-1950s served five years for armed robbery in Soledad Prison in California. Irwin commenced his college education while in prison and was assisted after release by Herbert Blumer, Erving Goffman, and David Matza at the University of California-Berkeley, and by Donald R. Cressey and Lewis Yablonsky at the University of California-Los Angeles. Irwin became a professor of sociology at San Francisco State in 1967 and remained there until his retirement in 1994. His first book, *The Felon*, was published in 1970, after which he wrote or co-wrote six more (Irwin, 1977; 1980; 1985; 2005; 2009; *American Friends*, 1985; Austin & Irwin, 1994). He also produced a large number of influential articles (see Richards, 2009). Throughout his life, Irwin devoted himself to using his prison experiences to challenge orthodox thinking about prison culture. For example, he disputed the functionalist view that prison culture is primarily a collective reaction to the 'pains of imprisonment' (cf. Sykes, 1958). Instead, he argued that prisoners bring their culture into jail, and that prison culture is in fact an amalgamation of criminal culture beyond the walls combined with the values of the working classes from which most inmates come (Irwin, 1970; Irwin & Cressey, 1962).

Irwin used his knowledge of, and contacts within, the criminal community to glean information from select groups of veteran convicts. In this way he was able to provide a unique insight into inmate culture, prisoner typologies, and conditions of confinement. He also wrote about the political manipulation of public fears of crime and about the creation of an expanding felony underclass. Irwin reminds us



that, despite their relative powerlessness, prisoners have social agency and do not simply comply with the dictates of the authorities. Instead, they struggle to reduce their state of deprivation, to ease their social condemnation, and to pursue their interests. Like people in other societies, inmates adapt to the extant environment. Convict codes and culture assist prisoners to survive relatively normally despite the rigors of incarceration. After release, some felons apply things they learned in prison to survival on the streets (see Richards, 2009).

Irwin used his ex-convict perspective to champion humanitarian correctional policies and to attack what he termed America's 'imprisonment binge' (Austin & Irwin, 2001), which saw US incarcerated populations burgeon from about half a million in 1980 to about 2.2 million by the time he died. In the late 1960s, he joined lawyers, reform activists, and ex-inmates to launch the United Prisoners' Union in California and then Project Rebound at San Francisco State University. Throughout his life, in fact, John Irwin combined academic learning with heuristic experience to champion the cause of prison reform.

One of the early foundations of the sociology of corrections was the prison ethnography. Clemmer (1940), Sykes (1956), Morris & Morris (1963) Cohen & Taylor (1972) and Jacobs (1977) all produced ground-breaking research about prison culture and the prison world. But apart from Irwin, and crime ethnographers like Jacobs (1998), Katz (1988), Shover (1996), and Weisheit (1998), inquiry of this type became scarce after the 1970s. In 2002, Wacquant lamented the demise of criminal ethnography, which coincided with the onset of mass incarceration in the 1980s. He wrote, "*The ethnography of the prison thus went into eclipse at the very moment it was most needed...the ethnography of the prison in the United States is not merely an endangered species but a virtually extinct one*" (p. 385). In 2003, Irwin also noted the dearth of recent published material on the effect of mass incarceration on prison conditions, changes in the social organization of prisoners, or the challenges facing ex-convicts after release. He criticized the false conclusions that some criminologists come to, derived from a fundamental misunderstanding about the meanings of what they see or are told.

## **The Emergence of Convict Criminology**

Irwin was the intellectual progenitor of convict criminology. In 1987, echoing Matza (1969), he argued for greater use of the qualitative approach to gain a more thoroughly rounded view of prisons. Two years later, at the American Society of Criminology (ASC) meetings in Reno, Nevada, Irwin spoke to Greg Newbold, then a newly-appointed sociology lecturer from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Newbold had served time in a juvenile detention centre (a 'boot camp') for growing cannabis in 1971, and then a seven-and-a-half year prison term for selling heroin. Like Irwin, he had studied in prison, had read for his PhD after release in 1980, and had commenced publishing research based on objective analysis informed by ethnographic reflexivity. At Reno, Irwin had expressed concern about the exploding American prison population and about his hopes for the growing number of convicts who were using their time in prison to become educated. He voiced the need for an organization of educated convicts to produce internally-informed research on prisons that could make a difference in sentencing practices and correctional policies. He spoke about the idea regularly from that time forth.

Coincidentally in Canada, a group of scholarly activists – Bob Gaucher, Howard Davidson and Liz Elliot – was thinking along similar lines. Disappointed about the dearth of ex-convict input to the International Conference on Penal Abolition III held in Montreal in 1987, in 1988 they had launched the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. *JPP* aimed to publish scholarly work by prisoners and ex-prisoners in an attempt to encourage inmate participation in policy debate. The journal has generated more than 20 issues since that time and some of the convict criminology group currently serve on the editorial board.

The convict criminology concept itself actually came into being some time later. In 1997 Chuck Terry, a former burglar and drug addict who had clocked up over 12 years in various US penitentiaries, contacted John Irwin and asked to meet him. Terry had commenced his college education at Oregon State Penitentiary in the 1980s and when he contacted Irwin he was half way through a PhD program at UC Irvine. Terry introduced Irwin to Alan Mobley who, having served ten years in federal prisons for cocaine trafficking, was also finishing a

doctorate at Irvine. Terry told Irwin that he knew of several other ex-prisoners who had advanced degrees, such as former 'pot' dealers Rick Jones and Steve Richards, and Ed Tromhauser, who had served several sentences for robbery. This was the kind of possibility Irwin had been dreaming of: a team of academically-trained ex-felons capable of producing experience-based research on prisons and law enforcement. Terry had already spoken to his program chair, Joan Petersilia, about the dearth of recent research on the internal realities of prison life. Petersilia, a senior criminological academic, had encouraged Terry to organize a special 'Convict Criminology' session at the forthcoming annual meeting of the ASC, scheduled for that November in San Diego. Irwin had no hesitation in giving Terry his support.

Titled 'Convicts Critique Criminology: The Last Seminar' and chaired by Irwin, the session at the 1997 ASC conference featured presentations by Mobley, Richards, and Tromhauser. This was the first time a collection of ex-convicts had appeared together on a national academic forum. That evening Richards, Terry, Irwin, and Irwin's co-author Jim Austin, discussed the potential for a collaborative work. From there, things moved quickly. In the spring of 1998, Richards and Jeff Ross from the University of Baltimore began preparing an edited book written by ex-convict academics. Ross, who had worked for almost four years in the psychiatric unit of a Canadian correctional facility (see Ross, 2011), combined with Richards to collect and edit papers from 19 invited contributors – not all of them former prisoners – in the United States and New Zealand. With a foreword by Todd Clear and a preface by John Irwin, the book was launched under the title *Convict Criminology* in 2003.

It was Richards and Ross who coined the term, 'convict criminology' and who have been its principal promoters. Since 1997, the group has held sessions at every ASC meeting as well as at other conference venues. The first session entitled 'Convict Criminology' was at ASC Toronto in 1999, by which time the team had been joined by former prisoners Rick Jones, Dan Murphy and Greg Newbold. By 2012, the group had been involved in more than 30 sessions at major criminology and sociology conferences. It has also published widely. Numerous books and refereed articles and scholarly book chapters

have been written by members of the convict criminology group (see Jones et al., 2005; Richards & Lenza, 2012).

## **The Work of Convict Criminology**

Like the criminal community itself, the group which calls itself 'convict criminology' is more eclectic than uniform in its character. Its members hail from a variety of backgrounds. Some, like Terry and Tromhauser, have extensive criminal histories and have lived under a range of correctional regimes. Others, like Mobley and Richards, have only been incarcerated once but received lengthy sentences. Members have done time in a variety of institutions and have been exposed to different types of programs. They have experienced federal as well as state institutions and have served in adult as well as juvenile facilities at all levels of security. As noted, a number of members of the group do not have criminal records but have worked in prisons or alongside prisoners and through that have gained personal understanding of the way correctional systems work and how they have changed over time.

Their life histories and associated contacts permit convict criminologists an interesting probative insight into the contemporary prison world. Members maintain currency with prison life by corresponding with inmates and their families and by visiting prisons either as individuals or through educational programs. Such contact helps them maintain an understanding of how prisons differ by region and security level, and how these things have altered. This is especially important in the United States, with a prison population that has more than doubled since 1990 and which operates 50 different state jurisdictions alongside the federal system. However the convict criminology group also has input from ex-convict academics in countries such as Finland, France, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (see Richards et al, 2010; 2011).

Because the direct experiences that members have had with criminal justice systems are so diverse, their perspectives inevitably vary. Opinions are not uniform and there are many debates within the group, concerning matters such as correctional policy, research orientation, use of terminology, and subjective methodology (see, e.g., Newbold & Ross, 2013). The work of the group is not confined to

corrections. Some have published ethnographic material not only on prisons, but also on crime itself and on aspects of law enforcement. What unifies the group is a shared belief that in order to be a well-rounded discipline, criminology and by extension criminal justice, requires input and commentary from people who have lived and/or worked around criminals and/or correctional facilities. Members do not claim to have the last word on criminology or to have unassailable opinions. They do not deny that prison officials and other researchers also have valid perspectives which may challenge their own. What they do insist is that prisoner viewpoints are an essential part of the correctional picture. Indeed, some of the great old classics of criminology came from the ethnographic observations of people such as Becker (1966), Clemmer (1940), Cohen (1955), Cohen & Taylor (1972), Goffman (1962), Jacobs (1977), Miller (1958), Morris & Morris (1963), Shaw (1938), Sutherland (1937), Sykes (1956), Thrasher (1923), Whyte (1943) and Yablonsky (1963). These are necessary building blocks to a science of criminology and criminal justice.

An advantage that former convict status affords an investigator is in the conduct of research itself. One of the rewards of having a prison record is that it opens doors to avenues of investigation that might otherwise remain closed. The fact that a researcher has been in prison and understands criminal culture and idiom puts him/her on a different footing to other researchers. We argue that criminals are more likely to be open and candid with an investigator they can identify with, and who will recognize misleading information. Greg Newbold's early graduate work, for example, sprung directly from his former status as a maximum-security prisoner. During his years in prison he studied inmate politics and culture, interviewed numerous inmates, and produced one of the only insider ethnologies of maximum security social organization (Newbold, 1977). After release, Newbold began investigating the institution's history. This was only possible because his prison connections gave him access, not only to criminals, but also to retired officers who would normally have been suspicious of an outsider. Most of the interview information collected was candid and verifiable. The result was a colorful, sometimes sensational history, containing material never before published which otherwise would have died with the passage of time (see Newbold, 1989).

In the United States, Jones & Schmid (2000) have made a similar contribution. These authors were able to gain a unique insight into American prisoners' lives by conducting research while Jones was serving a year-and-a-day sentence in a maximum security prison in Minnesota. With the cooperation of prison officials and assisted by Schmid on the outside, Jones conducted research *in situ*, which was supplemented after Jones' release by returning to the prison for focused interviews. Jones' dual role as inmate and sociologist provided a strong vantage point for analysis, although it also raised questions about his ability to evaluate impartially and independently. In this study, possible imbalance was controlled by combining Jones' 'insider' perspective with that of Schmid.

Denzin & Giardina (2009) argue that qualitative research is an essential component of good policy making and the achievement of social justice. This is an area where convict criminologists have also been active. In the 1990s, former prisoners Steve Richards and Richard Jones published research looking at the structural obstacles prisoners encountered upon release from prison in Iowa. These included having no money, no job, or a place to live (Richards, 1995; Richards & Jones, 1997). In the early 2000s, when the Commonwealth of Kentucky sought to lower its prison and community corrections costs, state authorities asked Richards and Jones to investigate ways to reduce the prison intake and the number of paroles failures. To develop an understanding of the problems of re-entry Richards and Jones interviewed a number of parolees, successful and unsuccessful, past and present. What they found was something they called a 'perpetual incarceration machine' whereby prisoners lacking adequate support, resources and coping skills are recycled from prison to parole and back again, without ever achieving full liberty (Austin, Richards & Jones, 2001; 2003a; 2003b; Richards, Austin & Jones, 2004).

In New Zealand, similar official use of ex-convict knowledge has been made. In 1995 when the Department of Corrections wanted information about the motivations for prison escapes, the research contractor (CRESA) hired Greg Newbold to travel around the country's prisons and interview all inmates with escape records. Newbold also contributed to the writing of the final report, which found that internal and external pressures, rather than a desire for freedom *per se*, were

the most common drivers of prison escapes (see McLellan, Saville-Smith & Newbold, 1996). The following year, during the course of New Zealand's ministerial *Review of Firearms Control* in 1996-97, the Commission hired Newbold to survey all of the country's prisoners with criminal histories involving firearms and to write up his findings (see Newbold, 1998; 1999). These were incorporated into the final report (Thorp, 1997). Because of his research profile and the unique perspective provided by his criminal background and contacts, Newbold has been an invited member or consultant to 17 government-appointed special committees including the Minister of Justice's penal advisory group (1991), and committees to set up a prison ombudsman (1993-94), to report on criminal legal aid (1993-94), to award New Zealand's first private prison contract (1995-96), and to advise on the revision of the country's *Police Act* (2006-08). He is regularly cited in the media and is recognized by the courts as an authority on crime and criminal justice, having given expert evidence in 18 judicial hearings in New Zealand and Australia.

One of the dilemmas facing convicts attending universities or applying for jobs is whether, or at what stage, a person's convict status should be revealed. This is particularly problematic in the US, where the stigma of a criminal conviction is high. In 2007, a group of convict criminologists conducted an open-ended survey, asking former prisoners currently employed in universities, about attempts to get academic work and their experiences of being hired. The resulting paper gave useful advice to convict candidates about disclosure, meeting administrators, handling difficult questions, giving presentations, and dealing with rejection (Ross, et al., 2010). The article was able to provide research-based advice valuable not only to prospective employees, but also to hiring committees considering job applicants with criminal records.

## **The Problem of Excessive Subjectivity**

Similar to Jewkes and Yuen, we recognize that emotionalism and subjective experience can play an important part in criminological experience. The passions aroused by perceptions of unjust incarceration, excessively long incarceration, or mistreatment can be compelling and valid components of criminological analysis. As her

example of the inmate Harry Roberts shows, and as was demonstrated so poignantly in Truman Capote's 1965 novel *In Cold Blood*, tragic circumstances and outcomes characterize victims as well as perpetrators in many criminal events.

But we believe that this can be taken too far. To let emotionalism or even subjective interpretation monopolize a scholarly discipline is to endanger its credibility. There must be balance, and as far as possible, subjective observation needs to be grounded in facts that are objective and verifiable. Just as bald data can be bland and meaningless without qualitative analysis, so can the value of ethnographic observation be empty without objective backing. In common with qualitative inquiry generally (see, eg Denzin & Giardina, 2009), one of the criticisms that convict criminology has faced is that it relies too heavily on the unsupported observations of auto-ethnographers, who have sometimes assumed that the experience of imprisonment to be a validation in itself. On conference panels and in other forums, some appear to believe that people acquire uniquely-inspired thinking through being in prison, and that this alone is enough to discredit people with whom they disagree. At professional meetings, particularly in convict criminology's early stages, John Irwin himself regularly chastized the group for over-reliance on personal anecdote and for failing to engage in much-needed empirical work. Convict criminology has encountered verbal and written critiques from other well-regarded scholars as well, who have challenged the group for lacking in objectivity, for over-generalizing about the work of non-convict scholars, and for parading their ex-convict status as if it gives them a premium on insight (see, e.g., Bosworth, 2004; Lilly, 2009; Maghan, 2004).

It is easy to see how these views are formed and there is some validity to them. Newbold & Ross (2013) have commented that on convict criminology conference panels in particular, there has been a tendency for participants to claim superior understanding based on prison insight. This is manifested in an 'old soldier' mentality among some, whereby proprietorship over prison scholarship is claimed, based on personal knowledge. In addition, many are embittered by their prison experiences and by what they see as academic stigmatization, giving them a tendency to emote, proselytize and play



the victim when things don't go their way. Another issue is that of balance, discussed above. We concur with Irwin that there has been a tendency in published research for convict criminologists to rely heavily on the auto-ethnographic component and sometimes to ignore the hard work and robust scientific requirements necessary for acceptance by high impact journals. If the valuable ethnographic contributions members can offer are to be taken seriously, Newbold & Ross (2013) argue that members need to produce more rigorous, superior-quality, work that can withstand editorial scrutiny from the best journals in the social science profession. Emotion may form part of a rounded understanding of a situation, but not emotionalism. Jewkes (p.71) observes, "There is...no place for hot-headedness in academic writing." Work must be presented in a studious, measured and considered way. These are some of the challenges that convict criminology faces if it is to advance its academic standing.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

From the point of view of the current authors, Yvonne Jewkes' defence of the auto-ethnographic method is an important contribution to criminological epistemology. In advocating the value of subjective inquiry, she illuminates a problem which has been growing within the discipline since ethnographic studies of prison and criminal culture became unfashionable in the 1980s. The result, over the last three decades, has been a proliferation of studies informed primarily by official data and managerial sources. Without the benefit of insider interpretations, conclusions have often been dry and passionless, and frequently slanted in one direction. The imbalance is derived from researchers writing about crime and prisons without any real knowledge of the grassroots realities of criminal or convict life. We agree with Jewkes that 'lived experience' and associated emotions are an important complement to research derived from empirical positivism. Both are required if a rounded perspective of criminological issues is to be attained.

Jewkes notes some of the difficulties facing ethnographers doing work inside prisons. The problems she identifies relate mostly to outsider ethnographers: people from the academy that enter the prison environment to gather first-hand data about institutions and

their inhabitants. To the current authors, the fears and uncertainties she notes are familiar – we, too, were once ‘cleanskin’ civilians entering prison for the first time. But unlike outside academics, whose contact is fleeting and who go home at night, we either lived or worked in prisons for many years. During those years we were digested inside what Abbott (1982) called ‘the belly of the beast’. This, in truth, is where our ‘rehabilitation’ really began as we studied for higher degrees. Now, armed with the knowledge and understanding that immersion in a foreign culture brings, we are able to research the institutions which once consumed us.

In 1997, a small number of academic felons began to get together and formed the group that is now loosely termed ‘convict criminology.’ One of the group’s central aims has been to revive the ethnographic perspective that has become rare in contemporary criminological research. Since 1997, members have produced dozens of books and hundreds of book chapters and articles. Most – but not all – have had to do with aspects of crime and incarceration, and have been informed by the auto-ethnographic method. The dilemmas facing outsider fieldworkers - embarrassment, anxiety, nervousness, uncertainty over interpreting convict argot and innuendo – are seldom a problem for those familiar with the culture and language of the prison. Most members feel quite comfortable in the company of the kinds of people they lived alongside for years. But this does not make their arguments impregnable. As we have observed, convict criminologists have their own ontological problems. They have to learn to put aside any prejudices, bitterness or resentment that may contaminate the objectivity of their work. And some convict criminologists need yet to recognize that the fact of having been in prison does not confer proprietorship over prison knowledge and understanding. Other views may be equally valid. Just as there is no place in academic writing for hot-headedness, so is there no place for arrogance.

Nonetheless, we have argued that the observations of former convicts who are now academics deserve an important role in debates over crime, corrections and law enforcement policy. The views of insiders break the complacency that hegemony of official interpretations brings. They disrupt familiar thought-patterns and

challenge what is often taken for granted. They question established and commonly-held assumptions. The subjective experience of ex-convicts, together with their collective knowledge of prisoners, criminals and the world they live in, provide color to critical analysis and contour understandings of the people and contexts that criminologists study.

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