Researching prisoner experiences with prison officers: an action research inspired approach

Journal Item

Researching Prisoner Experiences with Prison Officers: An Action Research-Inspired Approach[1]

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Abstract

This article reports on research that incorporated action research-inspired dimensions on a project conducted in three maximum-security prisons in England. The project was aimed at collecting ethnographically-informed data on prisoner experiences, at developing a method by which such data could be systematically and routinely collected by prison staff, and at facilitating opportunities for prison officers to understand the 'pains of imprisonment' from the perspectives of prisoners. The challenges and limitations of the project are discussed, with particular reference to the paradox of participation and the role of power relations within prisons and within the research process. It is suggested that despite the inherent difficulties of attempting a participative approach with more powerful actors, facilitating change on a larger scale may be best served by developing a 'pedagogy of the oppressors' alongside a 'pedagogy of the oppressed'.

Introduction

As the pages of this journal and other writings on action research demonstrate, action researchers conduct research differently. Reason and Bradbury define action research as 'a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing' (2008, p. 1). It is not, they argue, a methodology in itself, but an approach to inquiry that centralises engagement and meaningful collaboration with 'those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of intervention' (2008, p. 1). In contrast to more positivist approaches, where it is sometimes assumed that the researcher holds the expertise and the participants are data fields to be explored, action researchers concentrate on participatory approaches that work collaboratively with participants, focusing on *co-producing* knowledge and understanding (Olesen & Nordentoft, 2013). Whilst it is essential in any research context to consider and reflect upon the role of the researcher within research processes, too little attention is paid in traditional research methods training to researcher reflexivity, participatory research approaches and the idea that a research process might, in itself, be a driver for change. Much insight has been gained in the fields of social and educational research methodology – specifically in relation to how research is conceived, undertaken and utilised – through accounts of action researchers and reflexive researchers (see, for example, Arieli, et al., 2009; Thorkildsen, 2013; Phillips & Earle, 2010; Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

The decision to use an action research approach often depends – unsurprisingly – on the desire of the researcher and his or her collaborators to generate action and to make an impact (Rahman, 2008). Action researchers are not neutral observers. They are active facilitators, participants and learners (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 9). A commonality across action research projects is an underpinning activist intention and a desire to facilitate change either within an organisation or community or amongst individuals living in particular

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circumstances. Brydon-Miller et al. (2003: 11) argue that action researchers are committed to 'a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices.' They embed their participatory, change-focused aims into every aspect of a research project, from the design through to the analysis and dissemination. As a result, action research projects might be better thought about as change-oriented, cooperative intermediations than as neatly packaged research studies aimed at capturing data, analysing findings and disseminating results, as is the case with many traditional, positivistic research studies.

The idea of utilising research practices and processes to stimulate and facilitate change can be an attractive prospect for researchers whose interests lead them into environments that are particularly oppressive or authoritarian. However, working collaboratively in such environments can be a challenging task. In this article, I describe a project that included prison officers in an ethnographic, qualitative study of prisoner experiences. The project was 'messy', troubled by organisational and personal challenges, power dynamics and what has been called the 'paradox of participation' (Ospina et al., 2004; Arieli et al., 2009). I suggest that this project might be seen as an attempt to utilise some of the principles of action research – albeit in limited ways – with a small group of 'powerful' participants in an effort to create opportunities for them to reflect more critically on their practice and to gain greater insight about the experiences of those they held in custody. Through the example of this project, this article examines two problems. Firstly, it considers the limitations of utilising action research practices in the coercive, controlled and power-dense environment of the prison. Secondly, it reflects upon the dilemmas, paradoxes and possibilities of attempting to utilise research as a vehicle through which to challenge systemic problems as well as taken-for-granted assumptions held by one group of participants about another. By considering these problems the article aims to highlight the tensions, immovable structures and embedded power structures of the prison world, which thereby make these environments so resistant to meaningful change. In conclusion, it is tentatively suggested that utilising action research-inspired approaches within prisons or other hierarchical, oppressive environments may disrupt embedded structures and in-grained practices, but that more focus is needed on power relations at all levels in order to facilitate change on multiple levels at once.

Action Research in Prisons

One of the greatest strengths of action research is the opportunity it provides to work alongside those in marginalised positions in order to collaboratively challenge the status quo and to facilitate transformative change. However, there are some contexts and environments where it is exceptionally difficult to engage in meaningful participatory work with collaborators. Prisons are amongst the most difficult institutions in which to find ways of ensuring full collaborative participation and to promote wholesale transformation. Despite the obvious constraints of undertaking action research in prisons, either with staff or with prisoners, a few examples have been reported in the research literature (see Fine and Torre, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2008; Bennett et al., 2010; Ward et al. 2012).

Fine and Torre (2006, see also Fine et al., 2003) have provided a thorough exposition of the complexities of undertaking participatory action research in prison. Their project, conducted in a women's maximum-security prison in the US, was a collaborative evaluation of the value of maintaining access to college level education within the prison. The project was embarked upon when federal funding for college programmes in prisons was being

withdrawn, under then president Bill Clinton. Their work illustrated the importance of participating with and not on behalf of the women they worked with. But it also illustrated the complexities and limitations associated with conducting an action research project within the 'structural violence and oppressive atmosphere' that characterises prison environments. Importantly, their work showcased the capacity for an action research approach to allow collaborators to transcend their imported or ascribed roles and positions to work together as a team, sharing experiences and learning from and teaching one another as they worked collectively in active participation. The project yielded a number of co-authored publications from the collective research team, but in Fine and Torre (2006) the authors frankly discuss issues associated with working within the prison context that their collaborators in prison (or released from prison) would not have felt safe to disclose. The authors acknowledged that the prisoners within the research team were always more vulnerable than their non-prisoner counterparts. Fine and Torre (2006, p. 263-4) argue:

> *Their* poetry, books, journals…were searched, ransacked and tossed out when someone in administration decided to exert power or tried to warn the women, in the sado-masochistic rhythm of prison, about what they were writing (italics original).

Moreover, Fine and Torre explicitly recognised the troubling and inherently defeating nature of prison research for those attempting to facilitate radical, progressive, or meaningful change through research:

> …the critical consciousness that accompanies participatory research comes with anger, outrage, and a recognition of injustice that boils in prison. PAR [Participatory Action Research] speaks to an outside world, but often little inside changes (Fine and Torre, 2006, p. 264).

The research problem tackled by Fine and Torre and their collaborators lent itself well to an action research approach. The withdrawal of college level education in the prison presented a discrete issue that was identified, studied and collectively lobbied against. The external researchers could join forces with the insider researchers in ways that were emancipatory and affirming for all parties. Crucially, it provided a meaningful opportunity for all the collaborators to share and develop their individual and collective expertise in the service of completing the project. This was possible, in large measure, because the research problem was a symptom associated with the oppressed position of the women prisoners. The root cause of this symptom – the experience of imprisonment and the 'injustice that boils' within (see quotation above) – was not the issue under challenge in their research. But what if it had been? Fine and Torre recognise that the endemic injustices of prison life persist and 'little inside changes', even though their research made a meaningful difference to the lives of their collaborators. The question that remains, however, is whether or not it might be possible to use action research approaches and/or principles to challenge the very terms and conditions of confinement? Are there ways in which an action research approach could challenge the foundations of a repressive regime?

These over-arching, if somewhat idealistic, questions set the scene for the project that I became involved in that aimed to develop in-depth knowledge and understanding of the experiences of long-term prisoners using a design which included collaboration with prison officers in three maximum-security men's prisons in England. As will be discussed, the project cannot be described as action research. The constrained context in which it was being

conducted could not support a fully action research-oriented approach. Moreover, aspects of the project design positively *contradicted* some of the principles of action research. However, as will be revealed throughout its discussion, this project included an attempt to try to shed light on and disrupt aspects of the staff-prisoner relationship that account for some of the injustices and pains associated with prison life. Whilst it ultimately failed to create a sustainable impact, it suggested that there may be scope for applying action research principles and approaches - as a first step to meaningful change - in contexts where power imbalances and deeply embedded structures generate an oppressive status quo.

Studying Prisoner Experiences in Collaboration with Prison Staff

Origins of the Project

The invitation to undertake a qualitative research project in three maximum-security prisons was extended by senior managers in the Directorate of High Security in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS, formerly HM Prison Service). The starting point for the development of this project emerged out of findings from my doctoral research. I had undertaken an ethnographic study of two long-term, maximum-security prisons as a PhD student, the findings of which proved to be of interest to senior managers within the Prison Service. This research, which included prisoner accounts of prison life, revealed experiences that were repressive, tightly controlled, and deeply punishing (Drake, 2006). In addition, the research suggested a deterioration of staff-prisoner relationships with staff placing more emphasis on security and control measures (including, for example: CCTV, searching, dog patrols, surveillance, and intelligence gathering) for maintaining order than on staff-prisoner interactions. These findings troubled senior managers within the Directorate of High Security because maximum-security prisons had traditionally included a commitment to staff-prisoner engagement (though there had also long been problems of disorder, see Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1996). As a result, senior managers wanted to determine if prisoner experiences within the two prisons I studied during my doctoral research were anomalous or if staff-prisoner relationships were becoming more fractious across all English long-term, maximum-security prisons.

Thus the project was conceived and designed by a steering group comprised of academics (including myself, my former PhD supervisor and another experienced prison researcher) and Prison Service senior managers and personnel. The earliest discussions amongst this steering group were solely concerned with devising a project that generated qualitative, ethnographic data about prisoner experiences in three maximum-security prisons. However, these discussions quickly moved towards considering whether the research might also be instrumental in instigating change from within. Practice wisdom in British prisons has long included adherence to the principle that staff-prisoner relations are at the heart of effective prison practice (Home Office, 1984; see also Liebling et al., 2010). If staff-prisoner relationships were worsening across all maximum-security prisons, then senior managers had concerns about what the implications might be for prisoners' quality of life, safety and order in prisons, the legitimacy of the prison regime in the eyes of prisoners and rehabilitation prospects. Given these concerns, senior managers on the research steering group were interested in finding a more systematic means for gathering detailed information on the nature of prisoners' concerns about their confinement. They suggested that it would be useful for the research to be instrumental in developing a qualitative research process to be used in perpetuity to keep abreast of changes in long-term prisoners' perceptions of their prison experiences. Moreover, if such a process could be developed, perhaps it could be

conducted by existing prison staff and thus become a trigger for changes in staff-prisoner relationships. It was suggested that if a rolling research process could be incorporated into practice in maximum-security prisons, then it might offer a means to facilitate change both from within and from above simultaneously.

Research Design and Process

In design, the project was a large, but in many ways conventional, qualitative study. The research was carried out in two phases. I conducted phase one of the research entirely independently. It included preliminary ethnographic research (i.e. observations and interviews) whilst at the same time disseminating the plans and approach that the second phase of the research would follow. It was essential that prisoners were fully briefed about the research project and understood that some interviews would be conducted by prison officers. I communicated this in written and verbal form during the first phase of the research in each prison. Prisoners were invited to take part in the research through an open call to participate (posting notices on poster boards), through prisoner wing-representative groups, and through snowball and purposive informant-building approaches. I met personally with all prisoners who expressed an initial interest (in principle) in participating in order to provide them with detailed information about the research process.

The second phase of the research was a period of intensive observations and interviews with prisoners about their prison experiences, conducted alongside prison officer research collaborators. The officers who took part in the research were not trained researchers, but 'regular' prison (discipline) staff who volunteered or were invited to consider taking part in the project.

Crucially, the teams for each prison were not drawn from the staff group of the prison being researched. That is, prison officer researchers did not undertake research in their 'home' prisons. This decision was made in order to try to minimise the inevitable influence of existing interpersonal relationships between the staff conducting interviews and the prisoner interviewees. In addition, the building of the research team, as a whole, was cumulative. It began with an initial group of three prison officers, which grew by three with each successive prison, culminating in a group of nine prison officer researchers conducting the research in the third and final prison. Thus at the end of the research period in each prison three further research assistants were selected to join the team and to contribute to the research in the next prison.

Across the three prisons, 128 interviews were conducted with prisoners (49 of which were conducted by me independently). In the first prison, I conducted interviews collaboratively alongside each prison officer for their first few interviews. After these initial interviews the prison officer researchers conducted their interviews independently or alongside a colleague. In each subsequent prison all initial interviews were conducted in pairs, with either me or a more experienced prison officer researcher accompanying new members of the team on their first interviews. After an 'acclimatisation' day, each research interview was conducted one-to-one with prisoners.

In each prison I ensured that prisoners who participated in a research interview with a prison officer researcher had the opportunity to report any problems with the research. I also distributed surveys that asked prisoners to rate their research experiences and the extent to which they felt able to fully explain their experiences of imprisonment in the interview. Across the project, there were no significant problems identified by prisoners. They reported positively about being offered opportunities to openly discuss their experiences of imprisonment. Amongst the most positive comments that prisoners made were that taking part in the project had been a refreshing experience after which they felt increased feelings of hope that meaningful change in the prison environment might be possible.

The prison officers who collaborated on the project provided constant feedback throughout the research process and, in most respects, the team operated like a group of social science researchers. The officers enjoyed the experience of speaking and listening to prisoners in a different way than their jobs routinely allowed. They reported feeling exhilarated and excited; touched and traumatised.

> Prison officer 1: …the thing that is great about working on this project is that I really feel as if I am seeing prisoners as human beings and not just as numbers or as commodities. I just don't have the time to do that [in my own prison].
> Prison officer 2: Me too! This morning when a prisoner was telling me about the sexual abuse he had suffered in his life prior to committing his offences I really felt sympathy for him – that has rarely happened to me with any prisoner in the course of my work.

The team sometimes used the word 'traumatic' to describe the experience of interviewing prisoners. They found some of the conversations with prisoners which were about past abuses they had suffered or pains of imprisonment difficult to listen to, at times. Short team debriefs took place during the day and full debriefs in the evenings in order to ensure everyone was coping with the content of the interviews.

After the research was completed the research team wrote reflective notes on their experiences of working on the project. These were unanimously positive. The below quotations are illustrative of their perceptions:

> [I felt] comfortable, supported and on occasions frustrated by the limits of movement around the establishment and the restricted times for interviews….Throughout the entire project I was supported by the other members of the team….I felt cared for, listened to [and] fully informed. I also feel honoured to be part of this valuable team.

> From a personal point of view I found it very interesting and rewarding to be able to speak to both staff and prisoners in a manner and scenario that is very different to routine Prison Service work. The fact that we were able to sit and speak freely with no real time pressures or underlying agenda was refreshing and I got the feeling that prisoners felt the same way and had the confidence to be as honest as they could.

> Taking part in this research has given me the opportunity to see prisoners in a really different light and gave me a chance to understand their perspective much better.

The research design proved successful in the sense that it facilitated opportunities for more supportive and communicative relationships between staff and prisoners. The prison officer researchers entered into highly communicative dialogues with prisoners that added to their understanding of the experiences of prisoners. Despite these promising results, the project was ended prematurely. Prior to the submission of the final report (in January 2009) the senior manager who had commissioned the research and was the driving force behind the project from the outset left the Prison Service. Significant restructuring had begun to take place within the Prison Service as a result of decreases in public spending on prisons. One of the first areas within the Prison Service to be reduced was senior management staff. Those

who remained within the Directorate of High Security after this first round of restructuring were uncertain about the necessity or the viability of the future of a project of this nature. Thus, after the final report was submitted the project came to an abrupt end.

Paradoxes and Limitations of the Project

The above project was complex, difficult and, in many ways, problematic. It was 'messy' and troubled by power dynamics and the 'paradox of participation' (Ospina et al., 2004 & Arieli et al., 2009). Although, the project attempted to include action research principles, it cannot strictly be described as action research for several key reasons. The aspect of it that perhaps most contradicted an action research approach was the implicitly coercive way it included prison officers in the research process. A number of action researchers have identified the paradoxes associated with effectively enacting fully democratic and participatory methods (Arieli et al., 2009; Ziersch et al, 2011; Thorkildsen, 2013). Ospina et al. (2004), for example, have argued that when using a hybrid research design, they encountered paradoxes of participation when, for example, they were required by funders to design a project in advance of working with co-researchers. This 'paradox of participation' has been defined by Arieli et al. (2009) as '…a situation in which action researchers, acting to actualize participatory and democratic values, unintentionally impose participatory methods upon partners who are either unwilling or unable to act as researchers' (p. 275). Similarly, Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2011) have argued that 'participation' can become a 'buzz word' and can be subject to both branding and misuse (see also Nielsen & Svensson, 2006). Moreover, the co-optation of participatory approaches is a potential challenge to the democratic approach of action research and thus needs to be cautiously considered and, potentially, guarded against (Kristiansen & Block-Poulsen, 2011).

Power and the paradox of participation both exercised influence in this project in ways that were not fully anticipated at the outset. In particular, the project could only achieve democratic participation with the officer researchers to a limited extent, given that it was concerned with a problem 'identified from below' (by prisoners) and a project 'designed from above' (by a steering group). Importantly, the decision to collaborate with prison officers to undertake the research did not come from the *officers themselves*. Moreover, the project was conducted within the hierarchical structures of the prison world. Although the officer researchers 'willingly' volunteered to participate on the research team, their positioning within a rank-based, hierarchical and disciplined service meant that they were accustomed to following the orders of their superiors. Therefore, I was not sure whether they had 'volunteered' because a superior officer had told them they should, because they knew the project had headquarters approval or if they were genuinely interested in it. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulson (2011: 371) have argued that it is important to pay attention to the ways in which power is enacted in whatever context we find ourselves researching. They argue that it is essential that action researchers 'reflect critically on our own categories and ways of entering into relationships with partners [because]…if this is not done, then researchers might practice participation as enactment of interpretative power and education…' From an action research point of view, I would argue in retrospect, that the idea to provide opportunities for officers to challenge their taken-for-granted views on prisoners through a quasi-action research process was not subject to enough critical interrogation of either democratic participation or the officers' power positioning prior to undertaking the project.

Drilling down further into the problem with the participative element of this project reveals a core issue that was not resolved during the research process, which was that the

assessment of staff culture in maximum-security prisons as 'negative' was not consistent with staff perceptions. Prison officers tend to view their occupational and organisational cultures as collegial and supportive (Crawley, 2004; Drake, 2008). Many officers who worked in the two prisons I studied during my doctoral research would acknowledge that there was room for improvement in the way (some) officers worked with prisoners however, most officers had a great deal of pride in their own working practices and the work of their colleagues. They perceived the heavy security focus in maximum-security prisons as necessary and essential to maintaining order and safety (see Drake, 2011; 2012). Many saw the objectification of prisoners as not only unproblematic, but as a functional and valuable strategy for maintaining security. One of the tensions of this project was that it was a kind of 'intervention' with prison staff – to challenge their perceptions about prisoners. This underlying interventionist mission of the research undermined the integrity of its participatory elements. However, having attempted this project and having witnessed the increased reflective, critical awareness amongst the officers who took part (even if it was fleeting), I would argue that with a more carefully designed action research approach, subsequent work in this area could, ultimately, successfully disrupt oppressive structures either within prisons or, perhaps, in other power-dense environments.

Disrupting Oppressive Structures with an Action Research-Inspired Approach

There are two interrelated issues thrown up by the research project that warrant further exploration, particularly with reference to their relevance to wider action research practices and what a project of this nature might offer in terms of new directions in action research. The first issue relates to the capacity for action research approaches to allow collaborators to transcend their usual roles. In this case, a (quasi-) participatory approach allowed prison staff a unique opportunity to step outside the role of officer and enter into the role of researcher. The second issue concerns the potential role for action research principles to be drawn upon to instigate significant, foundational change. My reflections on this latter issue will be more tentative, but I aim to suggest that the principles on which action research are founded (i.e. social justice, democratic participation, challenging oppressive social arrangements) provide just the right antidote or formula for disrupting oppressive structures, *even when the approach can only be used in limited or incremental ways*. However, I first consider the issue and importance of 'role transcendence' in action research.

Action research approaches challenge the roles of 'researcher' and 'participant', as traditionally described in the human and social science literatures. Numerous descriptions and accounts of action research projects discuss the way roles, power dynamics and perspectives shift during the process of undertaking action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Fine & Torre, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Whilst these shifts can be disconcerting and uncomfortable for all concerned, they can also allow for changes of perspective that would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through other means.

In the prison project described here, shifting the prison staff out of the role of prison officer was an important dimension of the research process. The officer researchers were able to experience what it felt like to be an 'outsider' civilian inside a prison. Members of the research team commented on how surprised they were at the behaviour of their counterparts towards civilian visitors. They said they were often made to feel like 'outsiders', interlopers or 'spies' and learned to work hard to ingratiate themselves to the staff who were 'gatekeeping'. The techniques of rapport-building that must be employed by prison researchers have been described in the research literature (Jacobs, 1974; Waldram, 2009;

Drake and Harvey, 2013). However, this activity was new to the prison officer researchers who were accustomed to a more unconditional welcome when they undertook detached duty in a different prison. This gave the officers an insight into the closed ranks of prison officer culture and allowed them to glimpse what it felt like to be outside this group – either as a civilian or, potentially, as a prisoner. The research, therefore, provided a unique opportunity for the prison officer researchers to view the familiar world of the prison from an unfamiliar perspective.

Gaventa and Cornwall (2011) have argued that reflection, learning and the development of critical consciousness are key elements of action research. Moreover, they suggest that:

> …critical self-learning is important not only for the weak and powerless, but also for the more powerful actors who may themselves be trapped in received versions of their own situation. For this reason, we need to understand both the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 1970) and the 'pedagogy of the oppressor', and the relationship between the two (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2011, p. 76).

Given that the prison officer researchers in this study were able to transcend their usual roles, to an extent, and view the prison context from different perspectives, there may be considerable merit in attempting to utilise action research processes with both the powerful and the powerless simultaneously. However, as discussed above, there are particular challenges associated with the paradox of participation and power positioning that would need to be carefully considered.

The second issue I want to examine speaks to the problem of facilitating wholesale transformation within the prison environment and tentatively consider the potential role for action research principles to be drawn upon to instigate fundamental, foundational change. One of the greatest strengths of the project I have described here was, paradoxically, also its greatest weakness and, as it turned out, its fatal flaw. This flaw was that it was conceived with an exceptionally long-term vision in mind. It was understood by Prison Service senior managers that some fundamental changes needed to take place to try to address the widening gap between staff and prisoners in high security prisons. But it was also understood by them that this type of change would take a long time to effect. The long-term goals for the project were that qualitative research teams, comprised of prison officers would be formed, trained and deployed at annual or semi-annual intervals in perpetuity, so that more and more officers would be exposed to the research experience. Moreover, it was envisioned that their findings would be fed back into each of the prisons through multiple means (full staff meetings, focus groups and training modules) and be delivered by the officers who had been directly involved in the research. Thus, there was a working theory amongst the steering group that by providing these opportunities for prison officers to hear and better understand prisoners' experiences of prison first hand, a more sophisticated approach to working with prisoners might become possible – *over time*. The prison officers who worked on the project understood – and appreciated – that there were too few opportunities in their daily working lives to speak and listen to prisoners and they welcomed the opportunity to do so more freely. However, the project was largely viewed by them as an interesting and unusual opportunity. They did not see it as an activity that was potentially linked to fundamental changes in practice. For them to have done so, the project would have had to have become more firmly embedded in their organisational structure. The withdrawal of support for the project at the highest level of the Prison Service meant that any headway that was gained in our first attempt to facilitate enduring change was soon lost when each of the prison officer

researchers returned to their home establishments and the project came to a premature halt. However, the modest success of the project that emerged in the form of increased critical self-learning whilst the research process was underway suggested that root and branch change might best be accomplished through continued action and collaborative means. Through enacting action research principles and approaches, understanding and compassion were nurtured between groups that otherwise adhered to an 'us and them' interactional status quo. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p. 573) have argued that action research:

> …frequently emerges in situations where people want to make changes thoughtfully – that is, after critical reflection. It emerges when people want to think 'realistically' about where we are now, how things came to be that way, and from these starting points, how, in practice things might be changed.

Despite the limitations of this project, it seemed to suggest that in extremely oppressive environments, it might be possible to utilise action research approaches as a platform upon which fractured and endemically negative relationships could begin to be (incrementally) transformed.

Conclusion

It perhaps goes without saying to readers of this journal that action research is a pioneering, ground-breaking method (see Brydon-Miller et al., 2003 for a fuller endorsement of this statement). It is founded on principles of participation, user engagement, impact and change. These principles are now, increasingly, being espoused by research funders, higher education providers, and in a range of other research and education-related sectors. Thus, action researchers are, perhaps, poised to lead the way in innovative methods, cooperative research partnerships and participatory approaches. Moreover, a current trend in thinking across a variety of political and academic fields is that local problems need local solutions (Dempsey, et al., 2011; Ellison, et al., 2012; Lowndes, et al., 2012. There is considerable appetite in a variety of institutions to increase opportunities for academic and practitioner and/or community alliances. It is possible that we are at the cusp of a moment where the sites and engineers of knowledge production could feasibly shift more firmly away from the academy and toward those people and places who are already the experts in their respective fields or in their own lives.

Returning to one of the main issues that precipitated this project, as discussed at the beginning of this article, namely: could action research processes provide the means through which to facilitate systemic, foundational change? Could it, for example, be the vehicle for challenging the very terms and conditions of confinement? Despite, the evident failures of the project discussed here, I would argue that action research processes might be the *only* means by which the terms and conditions of confinement might be meaningfully challenged and changed. Gaventa and Cornwall (2011, p. 78) argue that participatory methods can operate in nuanced ways and 'can facilitate change at multiple levels, among multiple actors'. More crucially, they argue that large-scale change might be possible through participatory research and that change is contingent on the quality of relationships as much as on power relations, capacity or the relative strength of participating actors (p. 78-9).

In power-dense environments, such as prisons, it is difficult to effect meaningful, sustainable change either from below (through activist projects with prisoners) or from above (as the above research illustrates). However, as Gaventa and Cornwall (2011) suggest,

perhaps participatory approaches on multiple levels are what is needed when trying to facilitate larger scale change. Ideally, then, a project which aimed to draw together actors from multiple levels might ultimately be more successful and, potentially, sustainable. The difficulty, however, would be gaining access to undertake such research and securing sustainable 'buy in' and commitment from participants and collaborators. Olesen and Nordentoft (2013: 89) argue that action researchers aim to create the spaces of possibilities within the social worlds they participle in. Thus, it may be possible that mobilisation of third sector groups, activism with prisoners and prisoners families or further engagement with prison staff who are like those who participated in the project described here may be a 'way in' to opening up spaces of possibilities that can then be incrementally expanded through action research practices.

Whilst research can be deployed and utilised in many different ways to change the conditions in which we live, there are times when the research process itself can be that driver for change. In prisons and in the field of criminal justice more generally the goal of understanding is often absent from policy, political rhetoric and official practice (Harvey, 2011). Action research processes might provide a means by which those occupying different power positions (as discussed by Gaventa and Cornwall, 2011) can shift their perspectives, transcend their usual roles and gain deeper understandings both about themselves, their fellow collaborators and the environment in which they live or work. Within criminal justice settings, where 'othering' and dehumanisation are increasingly commonplace (see Drake, 2012) taking inspiration from action research principles and approaches may offer a practical and meaningful means by which the status quo might be questioned and unseated. Whilst the project discussed here ended prematurely, its vision for taking an incremental approach to foundational change using an action research-inspired approach to co-produce knowledge and understanding may offer a way to disrupt oppressive structures and work together with both powerful and powerless groups to tackle complex, enduring and perennial social problems.

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