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Prison ethnography by correspondence?

Cara Jardine
University of Strathclyde, UK

Abstract

Prison ethnography offers researchers a unique vantage point from which to explore the relationships, power dynamics, degradations, solidarities and sensory assaults which occur within the prison walls. Yet, despite the valuable insights to be gained from this methodological approach, prison ethnographies can be extremely challenging to conduct. Institutional pressures arising from both the prison and the contemporary University pose considerable obstacles for researchers, and the outbreak of Covid-19 has heightened these barriers further still. This article will argue that the methodology of cultural probes can preserve at least some of the ethos of ethnographic research when conducting research by correspondence. It will reflect on the methodological and ethical challenges of this approach, and critically discuss its potential to offer a more participatory and less extractive means for researching the nuances of prison life while collecting data from a distance.

Keywords

Cultural probes, ethics, prison research methods, qualitative research, reflexivity

Introduction

This article is concerned with the research problem of how you take forward a study which is designed to be ethnographic when you cannot visit the field. On 16 March 2020, I was undertaking a prison staff induction ahead of beginning a prolonged period of data collection, which was to include longitudinal qualitative interviews and periods of focused observation. These methods had been chosen to explore questions relating to how the community 'outside' enters the prison (e.g. through family contact, education, media, sport, work, or future plans), and how this is experienced by men and women in

Corresponding author:
Cara Jardine, University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 OLT, UK.
Email: cara.jardine@strath.ac.uk

custody. However, in the weeks in which I was negotiating access for this research, the Covid-19 pandemic was already unfolding. Just 7 days after my induction training had begun, the first UK national lockdown was announced, and the bulk of research involving face-to-face data collection had to be suspended, paused or redesigned (Maycock, 2022; Richardson et al., 2021).

In this article, I set out how I redesigned the project in light of these restrictions by adopting the creative method of cultural probes. Used most often in the fields of art and design, a key feature of cultural probes is that they attempt to preserve the broader aims of ethnographic methods without the physical presence of the researcher. This makes them not only suited to domestic or 'closed' setting such as hospitals and psychiatric care settings (Celikoglu et al., 2017; Crabtree et al., 2003), but also a particularly fitting methodological solution to the problem of how to maintain at least some degree of an ethnographic sensibility when conducting research by correspondence. By reflecting on this methodological shift, this article offers two key contributions. First, I will critically discuss a methodology which has been seldom used by criminologists, but which has considerable potential to be used creatively by qualitative researchers concerned with questions of harm and social justice. Second, it will make a wider contribution to the methodological literature on research in prisons by considering how the questions of power, identity and reciprocity remain relevant to research carried out 'at a distance'.

This article is organised in five sections. I will begin with an overview of the research as it was originally conceived, before going on to reflect on my decision to continue with the project, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. In the section 'Redesigning in light of Covid', I discuss how I redesigned the research to be carried by correspondence, and how I used the methodology of cultural probes in a prison context. In the 'Maintaining an ethnographic sensibility?' section, I outline how I attempted to retain the ethnographic ethos of the project, and the three strategies I adopted for doing so: creating opportunities to generate data with depth and richness; carefully attending to research ethics; and by reflecting on my own positionality. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that this method can preserve elements of an ethnographic sensibility, allowing for data to be generated which speak to both the significant life events of participants and the more 'everyday' elements of prison life, even when it is not possible to access the prison directly.

The original study: The prison as a permeable institution

The boundary between the prison in the community – and how this might be traversed or negotiated – is of growing concern to criminologists. Writing from a range of theoretical perspectives, scholars have highlighted the permeability of the prison wall, suggesting that this might cause us to think afresh about how contemporary research might engage with Goffman's analysis of the prison as a total institution, or indeed, the prison itself as an object of research (Armstrong and Jefferson, 2017; Ellis, 2021; Moran et al., 2013; Schliehe, 2016). These writings on the prison as 'a not-so-total' institution (Farrington, 1992: 7) point us towards the numerous avenues contemporary prison regimes may choose to offer as a means of connecting with the outside world, such as: arts, sports and education; projects which benefit the community; periods of temporary release; and

engagement with technology and media (Crewe et al., 2014; Herbert, 2018; Jewkes and Reisdorf, 2016; Meek and Lewis, 2014; Turner, 2016).

Others have focused their attention on the porous nature of the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' as a means of understanding prison culture, highlighting how wider social forces such as racial discrimination and economic marginalisation impact upon prison safety, and the social value of items such as drugs, trainers and branded clothing in a setting where both consumerism and masculine toughness are valorised (Gooch and Treadwell, 2020; McCorkle et al., 1995). Of course, much of this personal property is supplied by families, who can provide care, support and a sense of connection to the world outside; albeit often to the detriment of their own reserves of time, finance and emotional well-being (Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2007).

Yet, it is not only families outside who find the task of navigating relationships through the prison wall to be challenging. In my own research into the impact of imprisonment on family relationships, participants who were interviewed in custody described routines and strategies that kept their relationships together (e.g. regular visits, watching the same TV programmes, a shared interest in a particular sport, and celebrating significant moments such as Christmas, Eid or first days at school), but reflected that these moments of closeness could be both profoundly important and meaningful, but also painful. For some people, at some points in their sentences, reducing family contact, or 'keeping their head in the jail' was the only way to survive their sentence (for a fuller discussion, see Jardine, 2020). These strategies for survival raise wider questions as to how these connections to the world outside *in their totality* are experienced and navigated by those in custody. Consequently, I developed a new project which aimed to understand how (and to what extent) people in prison felt connected to the 'community' outside (however defined), and the wider implications for citizenship, inclusion and penal legitimacy. I planned to explore these questions through periods of observation and longitudinal qualitative interviews, as ethnographic methods would allow for a deep immersion in the field, for meaningful research relationships to be built, and for the meanings of everyday practices and routines to be explored (Drake et al., 2015; Irwin, 1987; Jefferson, 2021). Thus, these methods would allow me to understand not only the micro and mundane elements of prison life which might provide a sense of belonging to various communities, but also the emotions, power dynamics and relationships that shape these connections. Yet, just as I was beginning the final preparations for this fieldwork, the United Kingdom became gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic.

To pause or to proceed?

As the extent and seriousness of the pandemic became apparent, it also became clear that my fieldwork could not go ahead as planned. Not only had many aspects of the daily prison routine which I had hoped to observe – such as family visits, gym sessions, religious services and community groups – been suspended or disrupted, but face-to-face research was paused across the Scottish prison estate (Maycock, 2022). This then left me with the question of whether it was best to simply try to 'wait out' the worst effects of the pandemic, or if I should redesign the project so that it could proceed without me being physically present within the prison.

I wrestled with this question for some time, not least because carrying out research in a pandemic can place a further burden on people who are already possibly experiencing feelings of shock, trauma, anxiety and panic (Faircloth et al., 2022). That this was *not* a project about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on prison life also felt jarring. While documenting the harms of the prolonged isolation brought by periods of up to 22–23 hours confined to cell is both urgent and necessary (Armstrong et al., 2020; Maycock, 2022; Suhomlinova et al., 2022), I found myself unsure as to whether this project held the same immediate importance. I questioned my own motives, reflecting on whether my reluctance to pause the project was symptomatic of a deep enculturation in an academic climate that valorises speed and productivity (Mountz et al., 2015). I was acutely aware that I likely stood to benefit more from the project than any potential participant. I feared that without the opportunities that presence within a prison can provide for building relationships, rapport and credibility (Sparks, 2002), potential participants might feel exploited, objectified or reduced to simply a 'data point', thus adding to the feelings of powerlessness, trauma and misrecognition that may already be experienced by marginalised groups (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2020; Booth and Harriott, 2021).

However, reviewing previous prison studies conducted by correspondence offered some reassurance that face-to-face methods are not the only means of building ethical, inclusive and productive research relationships. For instance, Vannier (2020) argues that letter writing allowed many more people to share their experiences of serving a Life Without Parole sentence than would have been possible through more traditional methods. Correspondence methods can also foster more equitable and reciprocal research relationships, as Bosworth has used the exchange of letters to build a dialogue with research participants and to produce not only a book published as a resource for prisoners and their families, but also a collective piece reflecting on the process of conducting the project co-authored by Bosworth and four participants: Debi Campbell, Bonita Demby, Seth Ferranti and Michael Santos (Bosworth et al., 2005). Such a collaborative ethos resonates with earlier work by Umamaheswar (2014) who argues that supplementing prison-based interviews with an exchange of letters can cede greater power over the research process to participants, allowing them more time to reflect and respond at their own pace, and also to make connections with issues or topics not directly asked about by the researcher. Similarly, writing in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Maycock (2021) argues that exchanging letters with participants offered a space for the men taking part in the project to shape the research agenda.

None of the above is to suggest that these methods do not come without their challenges. The prison population is disproportionately drawn from marginalised communities, and consequently many – although by no means all – people in prison have lower levels of literacy,[1] which may render correspondence methods inaccessible or unappealing. Taking part in a correspondence project may feel risky for participants, who may fear their letters will be read by prison staff (Vannier, 2020). On a more practical point, letters can, and do, go missing (Bosworth et al., 2005; Maycock, 2021). Finally, there are far fewer studies using correspondence methods that prospective researchers might be guided by, as compared to prisons research utilising more traditional qualitative methods, where there is a rich vein of scholarship from which to draw. Nevertheless, it is clear from this smaller pool of writings on correspondence methods that research from a

distance need not be equated with research which is extractive or detached, and this gave me confidence to proceed with the project.

Redesigning in light of Covid

Once I had decided to continue the research, the methods were redesigned in consultation with the Scottish prison service (SPS). The SPS initially suggested that I conduct a survey and that they would be able to support 60 questionnaires being distributed in one prison, with a view to receiving 12 responses. While I was grateful for their continued support and interest in the project, the gulf between what I had set out to achieve (a 15-month period of observation and interviews) and what I might now hope for (12 questionnaire returns) was considerable. Not yet willing to fully relinquish some of the original aims of the project, I began researching methods which would help to preserve, at least in some limited form, the qualitative and ethnographic ethos of the research.

Of course, researchers have long had to navigate enduring obstacles to conducting qualitative and ethnographic work in prisons, with the closed nature of these spaces, the politicisation of crime and justice issues, availability of research funding, and the institutional arrangements of universities themselves all contributing to potential barriers (Wacquant, 2002). Creative responses to these challenges have included seeking inspiration from a broad range of disciplines and methods, such as archival work, volunteering within prisons, interviewing former prisoners, and networking with prison advocacy organisations, correctional officers' unions and journalists, to make 'windows in walls' which shed new light on the inner-workings of these institutions (Reiter, 2014). Relatedly, Gaborit (2019) draws on the work of Schatz (2009) in her reflections on seeking 'the nearest possible vantage point' from which to research experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar, where access to prisons or people currently serving prison sentences was far from guaranteed. In doing so, Gaborit suggests there is considerable value in adopting a broader understanding of the field as a social phenomenon rather than simply a geographical setting. Consequently, finding a range of ways to connect with the field – such as building relationships with former prisoners in the community, spending time with resettlement organisations, and attending events, festivals, monasteries and mediation schools – allowed her to access new insights into the lives of formerly imprisoned people, both before and after the incarceration, and the meanings which imprisonment held for them.

These collaborative and creative approaches to prisons research are clearly of considerable value. However, the ongoing pandemic not only brought periods of lockdown and restrictions on travel, but also placed substantial pressures on many organisations working with marginalised people as they sought to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances (Armstrong et al., 2020). I therefore found the methodology of cultural probes to be particularly inspiring, as this presented an opportunity to preserve the qualitative ethos of the project, without the need to collaborate with large numbers of organisations at such a challenging time. With their origins in the field of art and product design, cultural probes prioritise perceptions, experiences and views of participants by asking them to self-document their responses to pre-set tasks; typically through writing, drawing or painting, diary-keeping, scrap-booking, map making, sending postcards or

photography (Gaver et al., 1999; Kassan et al., 2020). As these tasks are completed *away from* the researcher, participants have greater autonomy over the research process, for instance, by choosing which/how many activities they wish to complete (Crabtree et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2008). By allowing this greater space for creative or artistic responses, cultural probes can also work well for research with marginalised groups, who may experience traditional research encounters as disempowering or as lacking relevance to their lives (Goopy and Kassan, 2019). Cultural probes are also well-suited to exploring questions or concepts which are contested, novel or under-theorised, as this methodology was designed with the express purpose of encouraging unexpected results (Mattelmäki, 2005). Furthermore, while cultural probes encourage different perspectives to be expressed, these differences need not be explained directly to a researcher. They are therefore more inclusive for those who do not enjoy expressing their thoughts and feelings verbally (Robertson, 2008), and perhaps particularly suited to exploring participants' views on abstract ideas such as 'community', which might be challenging to articulate in the immediacy of a research interview.[2]

Notably, researchers often use cultural probes in the initial stages of data collection, and then conduct interviews or focus groups to explore how participants have responded to the research materials (Crabtree et al., 2003). Had circumstances been different, I would also have planned to combine cultural probes with other qualitative methods; however, this was not possible while face-to-face data collection within Scottish prisons had been paused.[3] Similarly, while it might have been desirable to attempt to replicate this research dialogue through an ongoing exchange of letters – and researchers using this method in future may wish to consider doing so – this did not prove practicable for this project.[4] Thus, to retain as much of the ethnographic ethos of the research as possible within these constraints, careful planning went into the creation of the research packs.

A key concern when designing the materials was that they speak to the conceptual issues at the heart of the project, and that they do so in an accessible way. Community can be an effusive, contested and troubled concept, and therefore I attempted to strike a balance between offering some context to support participants' own reflections, but without imposing a particular definition or 'steer' as to what community meant for this project. Thus, when designing the materials, I drew on not only the literature on the prison as a permeable institution but also a range of conceptualisations of community, such as community as a place, a sense of belonging or something which is achieved through performances of citizenship (Brownlow, 2011; Lewis, 2016; Studdert and Walkerdine, 2016; Turner, 2016). To allow space for these competing perspectives to be explored, I created nine research activities, including a questionnaire which asked about experiences of community prior to and during imprisonment, diary pages, picture boards exploring what activities made people feel part of a community, postcards which asked for very short answers to specific questions (e.g. if you had the power to change one thing, what would you change?), and longer reflective writing prompts. Once finalised, these activities were assembled into research packs which also included an information booklet for participants, an accessible summary of this, and a number of prepaid envelopes. In March 2021, 60 of these were distributed within the prison originally intended to host the research, with the intention that participants could choose which activities to complete, and return them to me at a PO Box using the prepaid envelopes within the pack.

The strategy for sampling and recruitment was devised through prolonged discussion with my key contacts at the prison. While we all agreed that in ideal circumstances, I would personally run information sessions within the prison to publicise the project, this was not possible due to public health restrictions. The alternative of simply making the packs available without any introduction was also felt to be undesirable, and possibly too 'unstructured' an approach to garner interest. To resolve this issue, prison staff approached individuals who they felt might be particularly interested in the research, usually because they were already involved in education or other groups or activities (such as a Recovery Community), while I produced an information video about the project, which was played on the prison's information channel. This solution of course has its own problems, both because prisoners recruited by prison staff may be chosen because they are perceived as more likely to adhere to a particular narrative, and due to the risk that only prisoners who wish to demonstrate co-operation with staff may choose to take part (Roberts and Indermaur, 2008). These limitations notwithstanding, this approach was successful in generating interest in the research. Rather than receiving the 12 responses the SPS had advised I might expect, instead I received materials from 35 participants, and a total of over 200 individual pieces of correspondence.

Maintaining an ethnographic sensibility?

This unexpectedly high level of engagement suggests that the method of cultural probes was successful in that it was seen as interesting and relevant, at least to some imprisoned people. However, the question which I am concerned with here is how, and to what extent, can cultural probes offer a means of preserving the qualitative and ethnographic aims of the original project? It perhaps goes without saying that the depth and richness of the data gathered over the course of prolonged ethnographic immersion in the field cannot be replicated by a methodology which does not allow for direct observation or reciprocal engagement with participants. Rather, my aspirations for the revised project – which might also serve as a useful barometer of success here – were that these materials capture in some small way the rhythms and emotional contours of prison life, and the nuances of participants' experiences as citizens and community members both inside and outside of the prison.

Prioritising depth

To generate data with this depth and richness, it was essential to me that participants felt respected, and I therefore sought to promote autonomy and choice in a range of ways. I emphasised in both the information video and written participant information that there was no obligation to take part in the research, and for those who did choose to do so, there was no 'right' or 'wrong' way to complete the materials. I allowed for different levels of participation by highlighting that people could choose to complete as few or as many activities as they wished, and gave all the materials in each pack a unique identifier so that all the responses from a single participant could be analysed together, even if they were returned at different times. This flexibility seemed to be appreciated by participants, as while some did choose to return all nine activities, the most common number of responses by a participant was seven.

I also sought to maximise opportunities for choice in other smaller ways. For example, following the guidance contained in the literature on cultural probes, both the postcards and writing prompts were on blank rather than lined card, allowing space for more creative responses (Kassan et al., 2020). While many participants did provide written responses to the bulk of materials, these often conveyed both individuality and humour. For instance, one drew a heart around the option given for 'visits' rather than circling it, while another added 'puzzles' to this activity by writing this three times, each intersecting in the style of a crossword. Furthermore, throughout the design of all the materials I aimed to create spaces for participants to challenge or critique where they felt my questions were misguided. For instance, the first open writing prompt invited participants to agree or disagree with the view held by a participant in a previous project (that it is better to 'keep your head in the jail' and not think about life outside to make your sentence more survivable). By making it clear that this was a sentiment that someone had previously shared with me, and by inviting participants to agree or disagree, I hoped that this not only created a space for differing views, but also fostered at least some sense of the research as a dialogue.

I was also acutely aware from the literature on cultural probes that the aesthetics of materials are important for this method, and while the research packs should be easy for participants to engage with, whatever their level of education, they should not be 'condescending or childish' (Gaver et al., 1999). This seemed like prudent advice for prison researchers, not least because the ways in which researchers express themselves in writing may be unintentionally frustrating or alienating to participants, particularly in the absence of immediate opportunities for clarification (Bosworth et al., 2005). Consequently, the research materials went through a number of iterations in their development, as I sought to create materials which would be accessible and appealing to a wide range of people while still speaking to the conceptual puzzles which are at the heart of the project:

> Last week I was working with the designer on what started as maps and eventually began 'Bingo cards'. These have probably been the most difficult part of the pack of the research materials. I had originally thought of these as maps, because I wanted to capture a sense of the different spaces within the prison. This was a nod to the 'emotional geographies' of the institution . . . however, there were a number of challenges to achieving this . . . [so] the maps have become bingo cards. They are now a grid of 25 squares with different activities rather than spaces on them. I think that this is likely more reflective of the Covid context which we are now in; you might be able to work out, but it might be on the hall rather than in the gym . . . In the first proofs which came back, they still had the titles of 'bingo cards' which is how I had described them to the designer. I asked for these to be removed . . . because I felt a little uncomfortable with anything which alludes to prison being a game or having parallels with a game . . . With that in mind, the titles of the cards have been changed . . . This also feels like a better fit for the potential groups which are likely to be receiving them (adults), hopefully avoiding the impression of being too childish. (Research Diary entry, 23 November 2020)

Overall, while I cannot know how the materials were received by all potential participants – and particularly by those who chose not to take part – there are reasons to think my attempts to create materials which conveyed respect and genuine interest, and

therefore generated data with depth and richness, were at least partially successful. This is evident in the high levels of participant engagement with the materials, and the community picture boards that went through so many design iterations proved to be among the most popular activities. Second, looking across the responses to all the materials as a whole, it is also clear that they enabled people to share deeply personal thoughts and experiences. People wrote to me about their hopes, future plans and anxieties; what had brought them into prison; their families and relationships; their hobbies, interests and routines; and also their losses and regrets. Through these responses, I was able to gain an insight into both participants' significant life events and the smaller and more everyday emotional rhythms of prison life, with people describing activities which made them feel, among other emotions: 'rubbish', 'on top of the world', 'delighted', 'ok', 'nostalgic', 'hopeful', 'optimistic', 'pointless', 'bored' and 'anxious'.

Ethics

Gathering data with richness and depth inevitably places participants in a position of potential vulnerability and exposure. While cultural probes do not involve the same opportunities for intimate conversations as qualitative interviews, they can nonetheless provoke difficult feelings or emotions for participants. For example, when seeking to use cultural probes with the families of people with dementia, researchers have reported that the design of the probes were too 'confronting' for families, increasing the distress they felt about their relative's diagnosis (Van Rijn et al., 2010). Similarly, researchers working with groups of First Nations women in Australia found that cultural probes could elicit emotional responses on topics ranging from family to racism (Madden et al., 2014). These ethical issues are perhaps also more challenging to navigate in a correspondence project, as without being physically present during data collection, it is very difficult to know if the participant is upset or distressed by the research, or to take steps to address this.

These ethical risks required that particular attention was paid to informed consent. The opportunity to produce an information video was invaluable here, especially given the volume of written information in the research packs (which included a welcome letter from me, a covering letter from the SPS, a participant information sheet and a privacy notice, among other documents). Thus, while I had aimed for a concise 3 minutes, the final product was closer to eight as I talked through the aims and purpose of the research, introduced the materials in the packs, emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, and explained how the data would be stored and used. In the written information, I provided contact numbers for the Samaritans and the Independent Prison Monitors (both of which are free phone numbers).

Setting and explaining the limits of confidentiality was another concern. Both my own University Ethics Committee and SPS expressed a preference for the data to be gathered entirely anonymously, to reduce the amount of personal information I would hold. Eager to secure their approval, I agreed. Consequently, the research materials did not ask for names, prison numbers or other identifiers.[5] While it would be unwise for researchers using correspondence methods to offer absolute confidentiality – not least because prison mail can be subject to screening (Vannier, 2020) – it also left me without a satisfactory solution for what I would do if a participant shared information suggesting

a risk of immediate harm. This was not an unfounded concern. The Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland has stated that this period saw 'far too many' prisoners being confined to their cells for 22 hours a day, often in overcrowded conditions, a practice which was experienced by many as profoundly damaging to their mental health and well-being (Armstrong et al., 2020; HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS), 2021; Maycock, 2022). By not offering absolute confidentiality, I gave myself space to be able to raise any concerns with prison staff if necessary. This was a largely imperfect solution, as I would not have been able to tell them *who* specifically I was concerned about. However, I felt that being very clear with potential participants that I may not be able to take no action if serious harm was disclosed was essential for ensuring fully informed consent. Fortunately, this situation has not arisen.

The decision to collect data anonymously also created difficulties in both recognising the contribution of participants and crediting them for their efforts (should this be desired), and in allowing participants to retain ownership of their work. I attempted to resolve this by committing to copy and return materials where requested to do so, but emphasising that this would require participants to provide a return address (either in the prison or in the community), and that I would not be routinely requesting such details. As noted in my research diary, this solution also felt less than ideal:

> There is also a tension between collecting data anonymously, and the ethos of the more participatory elements of the project. For example, I want to offer people the opportunity to claim ownership of their work by having it posted back to them, or to receive copies of the findings so that the data collection feels less extractive. For this to be done, participants have to share either their prison number or an address with me – which I have noted on the information sheet . . . but it does feel a bit clunky. (Research Diary entry, 1 December 2020)

While no participants requested that their responses be returned, some did ask that I write to them later with summary findings of the project. To fulfil this commitment, in the autumn of 2021, I collaborated with the same graphic designer to produce a short and accessible interim findings report, detailing what I think I found so far, and the questions I am still thinking about. This has been posted to those who requested it, and I hope to be able to share it with other people in prison in the near future. While the tension between anonymity and recognition meant that the mechanism for sharing the findings has been more convoluted than would be desirable, these ongoing efforts are a small – and far from perfect – step towards a less extractive research practice and culture (Booth and Harriott, 2021).

Reflexivity

It has become increasingly common for prison researchers to provide a more open and reflexive account of their research practice, with one strand of this scholarship focusing on how the researcher's identity, emotions, actions and self-presentation might influence the dynamics of research relationships and the stories which they are able to access (Adams, 2021; Jewkes, 2012; Phillips and Earle, 2010; Piacentini, 2004; Scott, 2015). While correspondence methods are characterised by the absence of the researcher from

the field, the research materials they design nonetheless act as their representation. Consequently, this distance does not exempt those using correspondence methods from this form of reflection. While this argument is applicable to all the research materials I produced, my presence in the research materials is perhaps most apparent in the information video, as this offered a medium through which I could become visible to participants as a person, rather than as a faceless researcher.

The video was filmed in my kitchen, and its domestic setting (and production) was clear. Interestingly, some have suggested that home working can flatten the researcher–participant hierarchy, as both are in their familiar environments, and many of the outward signifiers of an academic role (such as an office space and professional clothing) are absent (Kotova, 2021). Others have struck a more cautious tone, suggesting that these small glimpses of domesticity can aid rapport when interviewing senior professionals, but also noting that there was considerable similarity in the home-working environments of both researchers and participants (Richardson et al., 2021). It perhaps goes without saying that this feeling of congruence between settings is unlikely to arise when researching prison life, and it may be that these brief impressions of my home served to highlight social distance, rather than shared experiences. Thus, while the video should not be seen uncritically as a means for aiding rapport, it was a useful tool for conveying not only a relatively large amount of information but also what I hope was perceived as a genuine interest in the lives of participants and openness hearing a range of views and experiences.

A second line of reflexive inquiry that is of particular importance when using correspondence methods is the relationship that the researcher has with the data that they do access. Indeed, Hebenton and Jou (2008) argue that Donna Haraway's seminal critique of scientific 'objectivity', where she argues that there is no 'view from nowhere', must prompt us to reflect upon the fact that knowledge is not only politically and socially situated – and therefore shaped by forces such as gender, class and colonialism – but it is also situated in particular bodies, places and research instruments. In this case, my reading and analysis of the materials people sent to me cannot be carried out cleanly or objectively, free from the influence of my social privileges, identity, biography or, indeed, wider social and political forces. At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic is by no means over, and the sheer scale of change and uncertainty which it has brought to everyday life had an impact on how I (at least initially) responded to these data, as the following analytical memo conveys:

> [one participant] has added – amongst other things – getting his hair cut as a means of feeling connected to a community in prison. This stood out for a number of reasons . . . I remember going to the optician in March 2021, which was a couple of months after Scotland had been placed into lockdown, and I really had seen very few people. I can clearly recall the small amount of social interaction I had with my optician (just making small talk) as having a really positive impact on my day and my mood. I wonder if this is why the inclusion of haircuts stood out so clearly to me? [But] it could tell us something important about the importance of (embodied) every day sociability? (Analytical memo, 9 August 2021)

While identifying how atypical, stressful or exceptional events may shape how we relate to our data may be reasonably straightforward, identifying our own sub-conscious biases and conceptual blind-spots is less so, especially for lone researchers (Crewe, 2014).

When using correspondence methods, these challenges are heightened, as without the immediacy of face-to-face interaction, it is much more difficult to ask follow-up questions, explore ambiguity, or to confirm what was meant in the expression of a particular sentence or sentiment. There is no doubt that at times, the materials I received conveyed painful experiences. For instance, when asked to summarise their experience of community in three words, one participant responded simply: 'shit hole, drugs, death'. When receiving such emotive writings, I felt motivated to progress this project, in the hope that what it cost participants to share these experiences could be offset by meaningful change. My own reaction, of course, also served to underscore to me the deeply held nature of my own political and normative views, leaving me keenly missing the opportunity to ask further questions to ensure that my reading of the data stayed as true as possible to the meanings participants had hoped to express.

Navigating these challenges requires the cultivation of both closeness to, and distance from, the data. Braun and Clarke's recent work on reflective thematic analysis provided a useful framework for beginning this analysis, and in particular, for creating closeness with the data, which they argue requires: 'reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning' (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 332). Fully engaging with this process takes time, and the analysis for this project is still ongoing. However, this slower pace of scholarship can create more productive spaces for reflexivity, as with greater distance we are better able to identify which paradigms, pressures and experiences – be they ontological, epistemological, relational, emotional, biographical or pragmatic – are influencing what we see in our data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). This has not been a passive process of waiting for new insights to appear, rather, these have been forged through an active process of analytical memoing and writing in my research diary. While they might seem oppositional, these twin strategies of cultivating closeness and distance have been invaluable. Closeness is essential for honouring the contributions of participants and generating new conceptual insights, while distance is also necessary to create spaces for the reflexive work that allows researcher subjectivity to become a means of strengthening the analytical process, rather than diminishing it.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that looking to methods more commonly used in the discipline of art and design can provide prison researchers with a means of attempting to preserve some of the qualitative and ethnographic ethos of much of the research in this field, even when circumstances necessitate that this research must be carried out at a distance. Adapting cultural probes to be used in a prison context allowed not only for the continuation of a project which might otherwise have been abandoned, but also for participants to share their feelings about major events in their lives – such as their hopes, ambitions, fears, traumas and loses – and the more mundane happenings which are often of considerable interest to qualitative researchers. For instance, participants told me of the recovery groups which prompted feelings of optimism, the TV box set binges which brought both boredom and welcome distraction, and their experiences of prison food. Thus, I would suggest that the research packs were successful in generating data with the depth and richness which I hoped for.

Yet, no method is without its limitations, and there are a number which must be recognised here. As noted above, cultural probes are often combined with other qualitative methods, and had circumstances been different, I would also have sought to explore the participants' responses to the research materials through interviews or focus groups. Without this additional round of face-to-face data collection, it is undeniably more difficult to explore unanswered questions or ambiguities in the data, and also to gain any concrete understanding as to how research participants experienced taking part in this project. Thus, while cultural probes have much to offer those conducting criminological research at a distance, they perhaps have even greater potential to generate data with depth and richness when they can be used in conjunction with other qualitative methods.

While these limitations must be acknowledged, I have also set out in this article some strategies for minimising their impact, such as carefully designing theoretically informed materials, and taking steps to cultivate both closeness to and distance from the data during analysis. Thus, while cultural probes negate the need for the researcher's physical presence within the field, a full consideration of the ethical, relational and emotional aspects of the research remain very much integral to this approach. Here, this included not only attention towards ethical research practice and reflexivity, but also creating spaces where participants could choose what to share, and in what ways, therefore maximising their autonomy in the research process. This is essential as not only are research relationships laden with hierarchies and power dynamics (Booth and Harriott, 2021), but criminological research is often carried out within a justice system which erodes moral worth and social standing of criminalised people (McNeill, 2019), placing a responsibility on all researchers – including those working from a distance – to put the dignity of participants at the centre of the research process.

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ORCID iD

Cara Jardine https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5970-2248

Notes

1. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people entering prison in England and Wales were assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old, compared to 15% of the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2021).
2. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why I had originally designed the project to include lengthy periods of 'hanging around', so that I might be able to learn about some of these more difficult to articulate aspects of community through ethnographic observation.

3. I am currently exploring opportunities to conduct some follow-up interviews or focus groups with people in prison to seek their views on some of the initial findings from the project. This possibility of undertaking some face-to-face research reflects the evolving – and uncertain – nature of the Covid-19 pandemic.
4. The principal reason for this is that both the Scottish Prison Service and my own University Ethics Committee expressed a preference for me not to hold personal details such as names, addresses and prison numbers. This is discussed in more detail below with regard to ethics.
5. The materials in each pack were given an identification number so that all the responses from each participant could be analysed together.

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Author biography

Cara Jardine is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow and Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde.