The Digital Divide: The importance of In-Person Data Collection in Exploring Post-Sentence Discrimination

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Introduction

This journal's themes speak to the relevance of the social sciences in today's landscape. The scene is dotted with shrinking department budgets, university prospectuses with missing degrees, and public and private questioning of social science's usefulness. Amidst these debates, I reflect on how social research that explores participants' experiences can have a real-world impact. In a technology-driven world, it is easy to replace physical fieldwork with online, desk-based research (Hesse-Biber, 2011). Online methods are long-standing, but have exemplified their accessibility and flexibility throughout, and since, the Covid-19 pandemic (Thunberg, 2021). Yet, being physically present can offer a deliberate, in-depth experience imbued with richness (Johnson *et al*., 2021). Purposeful and considered fieldwork is essential in social science disciplines to maintain our rigour and develop contextual understandings. I reflect on the experiences and benefits of conducting qualitative interviews during fieldwork to research the modern-day issue of post-sentence discrimination (Jacobs, 2015).

Journey of (Self) Discovery

As a keen traveller, I have visited numerous places within the UK, further afield in Europe, and across the seas to North America. Yet, my PhD fieldwork took me emotionally further than I expected.

I am finalising my PhD, researching the topic of post-sentence discrimination. This is the harassment, limitations, and restrictions that people with criminal records may experience, which can negatively impact rehabilitation and societal reintegration (Hoskins, 2018; Demleitner, 1999). This discrimination occurs after the completion of the instructed legal sentence, such as fines or imprisonment. Formal (*de jure*) discrimination is detailed in law, including disenfranchisement and employment disqualifications (Henry & Jacobs, 2007; Kirk & Wakefield, 2018). Whereas, informal (*de facto*) discrimination relates to practice and negatively impacts individuals, families, and

communities, including community unrest, stigmatisation, and family breakdown (Henry & Jacobs, 2007; Kirk & Wakefield, 2018).

My work compares the impacts of post-sentence discrimination in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, and Western Australia. I utilised qualitative, one-on-one semi-structured interviews to elicit opinions, thoughts and experiences. Qualitative interviews provide an opportunity for participants to describe their lived world in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Despite the current reign of technology and prevalence of online meetings, I wished to maximise in-person interviews. Being physically present gave me a profound sense of the social, political, and cultural dynamics within the research sites. You do not just read about experiences, but actually see them, smell them, and feel them. However, this understanding is unique to the researcher, and another may have different interpretations of the same institution or participants, making acknowledging positionality essential in maintaining rigour (Becker, 2017). Social researchers inevitably impact the research, as participants' voices are filtered through them.

Online interviews present ease, cost-effectiveness and participation from faraway places (Oliffe *et al*., 2021). However, in-person interviews can utilise probes, create flexibility, and build rapport with participants (Davies, 2008; Byrne, 2004). Probing can occur in online interviews, but I found non-verbal cues, like eye movement, hand gestures, and leg tapping more visible in-person. Furthermore, I wanted to access those snippets of information that only occur after the recording has ended or by making small talk in a shared space. Adhering to ethical principles of informed and continued consent and privacy, this information was not used verbatim but instead informed contextual issues and illuminated topics I could address in subsequent interviews (British Society of Criminology, 2015).

Solo travel was new to me. I was also nervous about having sole responsibility for the research outcomes. I visited Dublin first. This was a short, familiar journey. My nervousness was unfounded as the people I met were supportive, kind, and welcoming. The probation officers I spoke to impressed upon me dedicated service and the constant optimism of rehabilitation. This atmosphere was grounded on site. Walking through long corridors in the vast probation building and seeing the buzz of workers emphasised the change happening within those walls. I felt thankful and privileged that people took the time and energy to talk to me.

Next was Belfast in a rainy week in September. The charity workers I engaged with were incredible. They provided the opportunity to interview many service users. The relationships I built would have been impossible through online interviews alone, while also providing access to further, online interviews after my return home. The participants guided me through Belfast's unique circumstances, such as political tensions, local paramilitarism, and social housing (Morrison, 2024). My positionality as a young woman impacted the interviews, especially in-person, as I may have been viewed as more approachable than an older male (Bourke, 2014). Yet, I am English, and was hyperaware of this while in Belfast and Dublin. I may have been treated differently

depending on participants' views of English-Irish history. I believed the in-person interviews tackled any apprehension the participant, and myself, had about the interaction as we had time prior to the interview and afterwards to build rapport (Shah, 2024).

Face-to-face discussions created more intense "micro-geographies" of power relations between myself and the participant than online interviews (Elwood and Martin, 2000). I was physically sitting opposite participants while they spoke about their extreme daily challenges, while I may have presented as unavoidably detached from that lifestyle. Yet, this allowed for active listening and an informed gauge of interview direction. The stories shared by the service users felt deeply personal, but often reflected hard work, resistance, and positive mindsets. There were tears, laughter, and lessons for all. I learned about the strength of one man who had been left behind by society, his friends, and most painfully for him, his family, after gaining one minor conviction. This impressed upon me the brutality of the stereotypes society attaches to people with criminal records.

I visited Western Australia last, in November. I was scared. I have aerophobia. The first two trips were stressful but were over quickly. The trip to Perth saw me board three planes over thirty-plus hours. This was a huge challenge I overcame during my studies. I was anxious, exhausted, and flooded with adrenaline when I got to my hotel at 2 a.m. It felt surreal to think about just how far around the globe's curve I was. Experiences like these have made me a more self-reliant, prepared, and flexible social researcher.

Amidst the beauty and sun of Perth, I felt isolated. On one of my first days, I went to a local art gallery. This reminded me of home, where I am often found wandering amongst oil paintings and sculptures. Being in such a familiar space halfway around the world calmed and grounded me. There was even an exhibition by an artist who trained in my home city, Birmingham.

Academics in Perth had a wealth of knowledge and shared experiences of researching criminal records in the city, especially the difficulties in participant access. Their wisdom of working with people with criminal records would not have been available from solely reading previous research, legislation, and policy documents.

I encountered complications during my fieldwork in Australia. The charity I engaged with had a personnel change near the start of my fieldwork. This severely limited the number of people with criminal records I interviewed. Despite working with the charity, my access was limited. This taught me that I could not control everything in research and adaptation is essential. However, I was able speak to stakeholders and avidly learned about the jurisdiction. I visited a multitude of spaces concerned with local history and values, including museums, galleries, and national parks. This would have been impossible in online research and mitigated the small number of interviews I had. I gained insights into essential contextual information about colonialism, indigenous populations, and criminal justice development. My positionality as a white, English woman became more pronounced and I used this information to reflect upon my role in research progression, including deciding what aspects to prioritise and voices that may be inadvertently neglected (Rowe,

2014). Most Australian participants were white women. We shared characteristics, but also barriers to engaging with indigenous populations through not being a member of those communities ourselves.

I absorbed the daily activities of people living in Perth. I watched the news and read newspapers. I walked down highstreets and spoke to locals. The subtle dimensions of criminal justice, such as how news stories discussed crimes, the visibility of police in the streets, and locals' opinions on criminal justice policies, gave me additional understandings of post-sentence discrimination in Perth.

Looking Forward

There is increasing pressure on researchers to build networks, attend conferences, and present while conducting fieldwork. Yet, these should not overshadow the process of conducting research, or researcher wellbeing.

Although I travelled over 9,000 miles, to three places with different histories, criminal justice systems, and stories, some elements endured: housing crises, media promoted stereotypes—but also dedicated stakeholders, hope, and resilience.

I returned from each jurisdiction with renewed energy to research a hidden, but prevalent issue. Recognising the unseen hardships my participants experience heightened my perceptions of researcher duty to share their voices. This is the essence of social research.

I am indebted to each participant. Their thoughts, opinions, and histories were entrusted to me. Traveling for fieldwork built a greater sense of presence and developed relationships. If researchers can immerse themselves within local environments, I fully recommend this. You learn not only about your research sites, but about your own ability.

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