

Research in prison from the inside: an uncomfortable position for the "official - researcher"?

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Abstract

This text firstly evokes the need to build bridges between the university and the prison in order to enrich each other in reflective processes.

It then discusses the position of the native researcher in the administration, the advantages and disadvantages of this status and the methodological tools to be used to produce a quality scientific output, useful both to the penitentiary world and to the university.

1. Building bridges between the university and the prison

At the time of writing this, I have been working for the Belgian Prison Service for seventeen years. Almost two decades, during which I have observed the climate of mistrust that can sometimes take place with regard to the academic world within the staff.

Indeed, the researcher is still too often seen as disconnected from the reality on the ground, or even as a nosy-nosed man who is too quick to defend the prisoners against the administration, a speech that has been repeatedly heard by my predecessors ...¹

It is therefore with some apprehension that I began, in early 2016, a doctoral research on the subject of the introduction of private managerial logics in the Belgian penitentiary system in terms of the possible impact on work and social status of prisoners.

It was certainly not the first time that I had to face my professional activity and my university studies. I had already done it ten years ago when I obtained a master in criminology at the University of Liège. The difference here is that I have decided to conduct a research on a major evolution of the administration which employs me and on the possible difficulties inherent in it.

Yet convinced of the possibility and necessity of building lasting links between criminological research and prison, I chose to cling to this project, which could be rich in useful lessons for the future of our prison system.

As G. DE CONINCK and V. SERON wrote in 2007, universities and research have a lot to offer the prison in order to adapt it to the evolution of society and to implement measures to envisage the creation of a real prospect of reintegration for prisoners.²

¹DE CONINCK G., SERON V., *Entre science et humanisme : un criminologue dans les murs*. In : Une criminologie de la tradition à l'innovation. En hommage à Georges Kellens. Larcier, Bruxelles 2006, pp. 231 – 250.

² Ibid. pp. 237 – 238.

The 2012 - 2018 Management Plan for Belgian Prisons establishes a step in this direction, emphasizing the need to "develop [...] national and international networks to create a dynamic of mutual support"³, networks within of which it is quite natural to envisage the presence of universities.

This new culture of opening up and developing partnerships enabled me to benefit rather quickly from the support of the Director General of DG EPI, who gave me permission to conduct my research within a series pre-selected institutions.

It was now time to embark on this long and difficult task, beginning with the right methodological questions ...

2. What position should be adopted as a native researcher?

Familiarity with the research object and the associated risks of bias have, for decades, attracted the attention of the scientific community.

Many authors have examined the posture to be adopted by the researcher in the context of participant observation (which BECKER & GEER, cited by L. BAKER, define as a method of research in which the researcher " participates in the daily life of the people under study, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time »⁴) and the need for him to reconcile a sufficient involvement in the daily life of the subjects observed and the indispensable distance allowing a critical look at the data collected.⁵

Indeed, one can reasonably question the ability of a researcher to do scientific work when he is in the position of an observer involved in the functioning of the institution studied, "the question of the objectivity of the researcher in participating observation [being] [...] a recurrent question in sociology"⁶.

Referring to the Gold model⁷ that identifies the four possible roles that the researcher can play in participating observation, E. TAKYI attempted to highlight the most appropriate model:

- *Complete Observer*: he does not participate in the life of the subjects observed and has no interaction with them, which allows him to be completely detached from its object of study and to keep a neutral gaze on it but not offers him no opportunity to truly deepen his knowledge of the environment;

- *Complete Participant*: the researcher is an integral part of the group studied, thus benefiting from an extremely precise knowledge of the realities of the daily life of the subjects observed, but this total involvement can seriously harm its objectivity;

- *Observer-as-Participant*: observation predominates on participation, the researcher conducting interviews in the framework of unique visits. This position allows him to maintain a certain emotional detachment from the medium studied but prevents him from acquiring a thorough knowledge of the context and deprives him of any possibility of proximity with the individuals who are therefore less inclined to speak freely;

³ MEURISSE H., *Service Public Fédéral Justice, Direction Générale EPI – Etablissements Pénitentiaires, Plan de management 2012 – 2018*, 27 novembre 2012. Free translation by the author of this document.

⁴ BAKER L., *Observation: A complex research method*, Library Trends, 55 (1), 2006, p. 173.

⁵ TAKYI E., *The Challenge of Involvement and Detachment in Participant Observation*. The Qualitative Report, 20 (6), pp. 864 – 872. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss6/12>, p. 865.

⁶ PEREIRA I., CHAAR N., *Immanence, dévoilement et réflexivité. Faire de la sociologie à partir d'une implication militante sur le lieu professionnel*, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.revue-interrogations.org/Immanence-devoilement-et>, p. 1. Free translation by the author of this document

⁷ GOLD R.L. (1958), *Roles in sociological field observations*, Social Forces, 36 (3), 217 – 223 cité par TAKYI E., *The Challenge of Involvement and Detachment in Participant Observation*. The Qualitative Report, 20 (6), pp. 864 – 872. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss6/12>, p. 865 et ss.

- *Participant-as-Observer*: E. TAKYI identifies this last role as the most interesting from a methodological point of view⁸. Indeed, in this model, the researcher is quite actively involved in the daily life of the subject of study, and pure observation passes into the background, which offers the advantage of being seen as a friend to whom it is more easy to confide information contrary to a foreigner whose intentions can always be doubted.

I personally belong to the prison administration and can therefore be fairly qualified as a *Complete Participant*, but I have the chance to get closer to the status of *Participant-as-Observer* in the sense that if I am actually more or less directly impacted in my work by the reforms of the administration, I do not participate in the decision-making process in high place since I am a member of a local management team. In addition, the subject of my research, if it involves the detainees whose files I handle, is not properly speaking of my duties, since one of my colleagues is specifically responsible for matters related to the work of prisoners.

3. Is total neutrality possible?

According to A. SCHUTZ, quoted by F. THIAULT, "every interpretation of this world is based on a reserve of previous experiences, ours own or those transmitted to us by our parents or our teachers; these experiments, in the form of 'available knowledge', function as reference schemes."⁹

Can a researcher be perfectly neutral? This seems unlikely.

R. CANTER-KOHN asserts that it is "widely recognized today that the speaker, the enunciator, is always situated: that he looks from a certain point of view at the expense of other possible points of view, that he shows certain phenomena to the exclusion of others.. [...] In other words, it is commonly accepted today that the observer is part of his field of observation, that it is pertinent to study and elucidate his position, to make it visible, rather than to claim to its neutrality."¹⁰

The active involvement of the researcher on his field is an undeniable richness because it offers a non-negligible amount of knowledge on the daily realities and the logics of the organization, reducing the risks of "discussions disconnected from the reality."¹¹

However, being worried not to make my work a militant manifesto, it seemed to me necessary to put in place a methodology to enrich it with a diversity of points of view which, if they do not allow me to see directly brighter, in any case stimulate my critical reflection because, as P. BOURDIEU notes, "each of us [...] is encumbered by a past, [...] and this social past, whatever it is [...], is particularly burdensome and obtrusive when one is engaged in social science. [...] the researcher can and must mobilize his experience, that is, this past, in all his acts of research. But he is entitled to do so only on condition that he submits all these returns of the past to rigorous scientific examination."¹²

⁸ TAKYI E., op. cit. p. 870.

⁹ THIAULT F., *Recherche indigène et familiarité avec l'objet de recherche*, Etudes de communication [En ligne], 32 | 2009, <http://edc.revues.org/914>, p. 2. Free translation by the author of this document

¹⁰ CANTER-KOHN R., *Praticien et chercheur*, in MACKIEWICK M.P., *Praticien et chercheur. Parcours dans le champ social*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001, pp. 15 – 38. Free translation by the author of this document

¹¹ HILGERS M., *Observation participante et comparaison*. *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 371 (2013), p. 100. Free translation by the author of this document

¹² BOURDIEU P., *Participant Objectivation*,. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*, 9, p. 55.

4. Methodological Toolkit

In order to reduce as much as possible any risk of exaggerated subjectivity, it was necessary to use methodological tools enabling to reveal a wide variety of points of view to be confronted when carrying out a scientifically valid analysis of the phenomenon studied.

Since the introduction of private managerial logics into the Belgian prison system is quite recent, I decided to turn to France and the United Kingdom, both of which have more experience in this field and therefore, theoretically more critical decline in this trend and a much more abundant literature on the subject.

From the latter literary point of view, it was necessary to collect writings with radically different content according to the authors and their philosophical, political or professional orientation.

At the level of empirical research, my choice was based on a double qualitative-quantitative method.

Thus I asked for a series of interviews with colleagues from the selected Belgian prisons in order to gather their feelings about the evolution of prison management and the work of prisoners on the basis of their own experience within their prisons Institutions.

Meetings are also planned with the heads of the central management, the prison labour office and the partner companies in the management of the new prisons.

In addition, I have been in contact with the prison administrations of the two countries serving as points of comparison, as well as with observers from the penitentiary world, both in the academic world and in the voluntary sector.

Elected officials and collaborators from each major political party in Belgium have also agreed to participate, as the evolution of penitentiary philosophy is often intimately linked to changes in the political landscape.

Finally, and because they are the first to be affected by the changes in the detention regime, I chose to send a questionnaire to a sample of prisoners in each Belgian institution studied.

5. Facilitators and obstacles

Being part of the administration certainly offers advantages for conducting this type of research.

The definition of my subject has obviously been made easier by my experience in the field.

Empirical research is also facilitated, at least in Belgium.

The prison, even if it opens gradually outwards, remains a closed environment.

It is still often difficult for staff members to express themselves freely on certain subjects, since the fear of distortion of words or the use of them for purposes detrimental to the proper performance of their duties is present in a non-negligible share of them.

My position as a *traveling companion* thus undeniably facilitates exchanges through a climate of mutual trust and common language.

Parallel to these facilities, obstacles inevitably arise on my way in spite of or because of my status.

Thus, one must be able to juggle with the need to take a critical look as a scientist and the indispensable loyalty to the institution expected of any civil servant. In other words, to be able to express his questioning and even his disagreement with certain political or managerial orientations while keeping the necessary reserve due to his position as a manager in the administration.

If the interviews with the different professionals are facilitated, the same is not true of the questionnaires sent to prisoners, mainly in the institution where I exercise my duties because I maintain my label as a director and it is therefore inconceivable under these circumstances to hope to receive sincere answers to my questions. It is therefore necessary to develop partnerships with actors to which the detainees are more confident, such as certain assistance services to litigants and to transmit forms bearing the university logo.

The last major difficulty that can be identified is far from anecdotal and concerns the view that the academic world can take on the validity of the work produced.

Legitimate questions may arise as to the researcher's ability to distance himself sufficiently from the prejudices linked to his professional experience and not to be influenced by hierarchical logics specific to the administration.

It is therefore important to establish, once the doctoral project is submitted, a climate of trust between the researcher and the research promoter.

Potential difficulties should be mentioned at the outset and regular contacts should be made to take stock of the progress of the work and the obstacles encountered.

The ultimate proof of the intellectual honesty of the doctoral student will be ultimately brought by the filing of a thesis sufficiently rich in elements allowing a healthy critical discussion.

These difficulties have already been pointed out in the past by others who have endorsed this double costume as a researcher and member of the administration.

Thus, A. FRANCOIS, who also served as prison director during her PhD in criminology at the University of Liège, expressed these terms: " We did know that our position as a director in prison could benefit us (for example, to facilitate confidentiality in certain situations) and create inconveniences or obstacles ([...], false discourse motivated by the granting of "favors", etc.), but that the risk remained permanently to abandon our objectivity and neutrality, for example by unconsciously assimilating the discourse of the system. Even if all these questions were clear, our position was clear and the boundary between our dual function of "researcher-director" was well-marked, and we were not unaware of the possible reproaches of the scientific and criminological circles.

[...] Although it is not easy to differentiate between the two functions, we have constantly been concerned not to mix these two approaches [...]. "¹³

In my view, this last sentence constitutes an essential element: an important part of the attention of the native researcher must be the constant differentiation of his two functions.

This certainly requires a permanent effort of duplication, almost making this schizophrenic position, but it is the price to pay to provide quality work.

¹³ FRANCOIS A., *Etude sur la sexualité en milieu carcéral belge. De l'enfermement de la sexualité à la liberté d'adaptation des comportements sexuels*, Thèse en vue de l'obtention du grade de Docteur en Criminologie, Université de Liège, 2015, p. 160. Free translation by the author of this document

6. Conclusion

Establishing lasting links between the world of research and that of prison can only enrich both sides.

The prison sector has everything to gain by opening its doors to academics and to facilitate their work of observation and objective criticism of the reality of institutions, because it is through these data that we can hope to evolve some aspects of detention by having a solid scientific material to support reflections at the managerial and political levels.

The status of a native researcher, although it can sometimes be a source of uncomfortable positions, is in my opinion an undeniable wealth.

The knowledge of the field and the address book of such a person allow him to easily have contacts and information that would be difficult or not at all accessible to the external researcher.

The results of its observations and reflections can directly benefit the administration, which will have an internal partner who has taken a step back from everyday life to produce useful knowledge for future debates on the organization of the system.

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