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## INTERVIEWING IN THE PRISON COMMUNITY

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The author is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department of New York University. She received her B.A. (1958) from the University of Connecticut, and an M.A. (1960) and a Ph.D. (1965) from Northwestern University. She is the author of two recently published books: *Society of Women: A Study of a Women's Prison* (which is a complete study of the subject matter of her present article), and *Juvenile Delinquency: A Book of Readings*.

The contents and significance of Dr. Giallombardo's present paper may be assessed as follows:

The caste system of inmates and staff in the prison organization poses special problems for the researcher doing field work in this setting. The kind of information obtained in field interviews and by participant observation depends largely upon: (1) the extent to which both the inmate body and the staff develops and sustains confidence in the researcher; and (2) the inmates' perception of the researcher's interaction with staff members. Specific methods and techniques utilized to overcome the problems for obtaining data in these connections are discussed.

Interviewing in the prison setting presents a number of problems not encountered in other types of research interviewing because of the caste division in which the staff and the inmates are divided. Indeed, extended field work in the prison setting requires that the researcher limit staff contacts throughout the entire period that the research is in progress. Moreover, inasmuch as inmates are committed daily, as well as released, the problem of establishing and sustaining rapport becomes a constant and integral factor of prison research.

In one sense the sociologist defines his own role in the field, and in another sense, it is defined for him by the situation and the perspective of his respondents. Problems of procedure differ for every category of respondents in the prison. In this paper, specific techniques utilized to elicit cooperation from inmates and staff members are discussed. It is hoped that detailed description of the experiences involved in the research interview and setting may lead to a greater understanding of the relations of the researcher with his informants, and to refinement and codification of interview techniques.<sup>1</sup>

\* The author wishes to express her appreciation to Richard D. Schwartz, Paul Bohannon, and Raymond D. Mack for their criticisms and suggestions regarding an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Among the recent excellent papers dealing with various aspects of the interviewing process, see especially: (a) the entire September issue of Volume 62 of the *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY* on The Interview in Social Research; (b) Kincaid & Bright, *Interviewing the Business Elite*, 63 *AM. J. SOC.* 304 (1957); (c) Smigel, *Interviewing a Legal Elite: The Wall Street Lawyer*, 64 *AM. J. SOC.* 159 (1958); and (d) Lenski &

The larger research from which this paper is based had two major anchoring concerns: (1) to investigate the social situation of a women's prison as a system of roles and functions; (2) to compare the findings with relevant literature on the male prison in order to account for the emergence of the inmate social system, as well as differences in structural form between the two prison communities.

Field work for a period of one year was undertaken in one of the largest reformatories for women in the East. My role as participant observer at all inmate activities, and in the cottage units, made it possible for me to get to know all the inmates who were at the prison when the study began, approximately 650, as well as many of the inmates who were committed during the course of the year.

In addition to interviews held with inmates, data were gathered by personal observation of formally scheduled inmate activities: work assignments, vocational and avocational classes, group counseling sessions, recreational and religious activities, and academic educational classes. At all these functions, the investigator sat with the inmates in order to dissociate the researcher's role from staff roles. Other sources of data were obtained by personal observation of informal interaction patterns in the cottage units and on the grounds, attendance at classification and sub-classification meetings, disciplinary court, meetings of the correctional officers, as well as other

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Leggett, *Caste, Class, and Deference in the Research Interview*, 65 *AM. J. SOC.* 463 (1960).

scheduled staff meetings. Informal interviews with staff members provided additional data, and during the last week of the study, an anonymous questionnaire was administered to all the correctional officers to obtain data on the perceptions of their role function, as well as the sociological characteristics of the correctional officers.

#### INTRODUCING THE STUDY

The study was introduced to the staff and inmates by a memorandum signed by the warden of the prison. The memorandum was addressed to both staff members and inmates and stated that the investigator was a social scientist from Northwestern University, and would be at the prison for a period of one year for the purpose of making a scientific study of "institutional living". (I had chosen this term as it was vague and broad enough to include all things.) The cooperation of staff and inmates was urged, and the confidentiality of all interviews was stressed. A copy of the memorandum was given to each staff member, and one copy was placed on each of the cottage bulletin boards.

As far as the staff is concerned, this method of introducing the study posed no problems, and informal conversations with staff members sufficed to answer any questions staff members had regarding the study. After a couple of days at the prison, however, I discovered that inmates rarely read notices placed on the cottage bulletin boards. Matters which are considered to be important by the administration are read aloud to the inmates by the correctional officers. Therefore, I abandoned my original plan of spending the entire first week or two in the record office reading each inmate's case history and collecting data on the sociological characteristics of the inmate population, and proceeded to introduce the study personally to the inmate body. The better part of the first three weeks was spent walking about the prison grounds, joining groups of inmates on the field, in front of the cottages, or on the cottage porches. I would begin, "Hello, We haven't met. . . ." None of the inmates raised any objections when they were asked if I might join them, but they were extremely suspicious of my presence at the prison. Everyone's presence in the prison structure must be justified; one is either part of the staff or part of the inmate body, and the researcher in the prison setting is neither fish nor fowl. Visitors from the outside world are a rare phenomenon in the prison. Individuals visiting

inmates are brought directly to the visiting room by car from the gate, and they leave the same way; therefore, the general inmate body does not see them. Other visitors are escorted through the garment shop, vocational building, school building, and perhaps the honor cottage by the warden or associate warden. They do not, however, walk freely about the prison grounds talking to the inmates.

The researcher's role required clarification. All the inmates I met during the first two weeks raised these questions without exception: "Where do you live?"; "Do you live on the reservation?". I explained that I lived "in town". If they had any doubts on this score (and some inmates did), it soon became apparent to the inmates that I did not live on the institutional grounds. Had I done so, there is no doubt that it would seriously have hampered the study as it would have identified me with staff. Although I did not live on the prison grounds in order to eliminate possible identification with the staff, I visited the physical plant daily from the beginning of the day's activities to the end of the day, or from about eight o'clock in the morning to approximately ten o'clock in the evening. During the first six months of the study I was at the prison almost without exception every day of the week. However, I made a special effort during this period to make my behavior unpredictable both to inmates and staff. From time to time, I would arrive at odd hours, or leave the prison during the day for an hour or so, in order to dissociate my role from that of the inmates and staff.

Insofar as it was possible for me to do so, I tried to approximate the living existence of the inmate; namely, by my continuous presence day after day at the formally scheduled functions for the inmates, and by spending many hours with them in the cottages and on the prison grounds. This procedure was consistent with the inmates' belief that it is not possible to understand the *inside* or prison world by making a few isolated visits to the prison, and was important in establishing the validity of the researcher's role.

The next questions which seemed to be of vital concern to the inmates were my entry into the prison, and who was paying for the research. "How come they let you in?"; "Other people have tried to get in here and couldn't."; "Who's paying for this?"; "Where's the money coming from?"; "Are you a reporter?"; "Are you from the F.B.I.?" The inmates were assured that I was not from the

F.B.I., nor was I a reporter. I explained that I was a sociologist. University affiliation and sponsorship, and the scientific nature of the study were stressed. All this, however, still tended to leave the inmates skeptical, and they said they would have to take my word for it. "How do we know you're not lying?", they insisted. There are no quick and ready answers which one can give to such objections, and I found myself simply repeating the same statements which had made the inmates skeptical in the first place. After this, I began to carry with me the Northwestern University Dental School Bulletin which listed me as a lecturer in sociology. While faculty listing did not, of course, "prove" my identity, I found it helpful and to be sufficient evidence for most inmates during this early and crucial stage of the research. The researcher's role-playing in the research setting is important for the kinds of responses he is able to obtain. Equally important, however, is the role which is assigned to the researcher by the informant; and this role will be based largely upon the informant's conception of the researcher's group affiliations. University affiliation and sponsorship gave the research a neutral character because it did away with inmates' fear that the Bureau of Prisons or the F.B.I. was checking up on any particular inmate; and, further, that any information obtained might be used to the disadvantage of the inmates.

#### ESTABLISHING RAPPORT WITH INMATES

In the early stages of the research, the inmates often asked what "good" the study would do. Hence, to the original classification of the study as one concerned with "institutional living" I added verbally that the purpose was to "help women in trouble everywhere". However, it was emphasized that participation in the research would in no way mitigate the inmate's sentence, nor would it increase her chances for parole. It was made clear that the inmate would not receive any direct benefit from the study. At the same time, however, it was pointed out that participation would not be harmful to the inmate. In all instances, the scientific nature of the research was emphasized. During the first three weeks, approximately one-half to two hours were usually spent with each group of inmates or isolated inmates in idle and friendly conversation about general prison life. I met about one-fourth of the inmates in this way. Care was taken not to raise questions

about the inmate's informal system, although the inmates introduced many issues and topics which they discussed among themselves that provided many clues and orientation for later interviews. When I left each group (or inmate) I thanked them for talking with me and asked if I might come to visit them in their cottage units sometime during the year. I had expected some refusals; none of the inmates refused, but a few inmates said that although I could come they had "nothing to say". (During the entire year, only one recently committed inmate refused the observer an interview and this was approximately four months before the study ended.)

Looking back, I think this time was very well spent. At the outset, attention was directed solely to developing rapport with the inmates. I did not pressure the inmates with questions, and I began to establish very early a viable place for myself in the prison. As a result, I was not unduly tested. However, I was put through a few trials during the first two months, particularly in connection with contraband which inmates claimed (whether true or not I do not know) they had hidden somewhere in their rooms. Inmates stole food and pots of coffee from the dining room in my presence, and made certain that they had called it to my attention in some way. After I was accepted by the inmates, however, my presence was ignored in the same way that an inmate known to be loyal to the inmate group would be ignored. In addition, two inmates asked me to do them "favors". One inmate asked me to mail a letter to her husband, as she claimed she had not received any mail from him, and she was certain her mail was not "going out". I refused politely and firmly but in no uncertain terms, and said that the only material I took out of the prison was material for my research and I would bring nothing into the prison. A short time after this, another inmate asked if I would bring her in a certain magazine. She received the identical explanation I had given the other inmate. Neither inmate showed any resentment. After this I never received any requests for "favors".

Inmates also tested me in the beginning concerning the confidentiality of the responses. They would say, "I suppose other inmates have told you this"; "I saw you talking to—the other day. Did she say. . .?"; and "Have the other girls told you the same thing?". To questions of this nature,

I gave a stock answer: "All interviews are confidential".

In addition to prefacing each interview session with remarks about the scientific nature of the study, and the confidentiality of the interview, I also stressed the fact that the inmate's participation was voluntary. In connection with the latter, it was pointed out that it was the inmate's privilege to refuse to answer any questions which might be directed to her. This clearly established that the researcher did not stand in an authoritarian position to the inmates, and eliminated serious questions of reliability and validity in connection with responses. In the early interviews, there was a reluctance on the part of some inmates, or an expressed preference not to answer questions, particularly in connection with their homosexual activities.<sup>2</sup> In these instances, I immediately dropped the subject, and made no attempt to elicit responses to the original questions. The same inmate, however, was interviewed one or two more times at a later date.

When inmates made statements about prison life, I asked them to describe a situation which was related to the point under discussion, but asked her not to mention names—either those of the inmates or staff members. This procedure did much to eliminate fear on the part of the inmates that anyone would be reported, and that I was "checking up" on any particular inmates. Inmates were often eager to mention names of the staff; when they did, I reminded them that it was not necessary to mention names.

After three months at the prison, prefatory remarks to the inmates, namely, that the inmate's participation was voluntary and that the inmate was free to refuse to answer questions were waved aside with: "It's O.K., you can ask."; "I heard you don't say anything."; "Inmate—said if you had told what she said, she'd be up in seclusion", and the like. After approximately four months at the prison, old timers would describe me to new inmates, "She's no cop; you can answer her questions". Nevertheless, I found that I often had to explain further the purposes of the study to newly committed inmates, and to be especially alert about maintaining the proper social distance with staff members in the presence of newly committed inmates. Another index of my acceptability was

that whenever I joined groups of inmates, they ignored my presence except for a greeting, and continued their conversations in my presence. Whenever an inmate of questionable loyalty approached, however, the inmates would halt their conversations with such phrases as: "cool it"; "later for it"; "this one's got nose trouble"; "watch this snitcher." Furthermore, if the inmate was so rash as to raise questions relating to inmate life or any particular inmate, she was silenced with, "That's a penitentiary question". In addition, whenever I put in an appearance in the cottages or elsewhere in the prison, where inmates were functioning in the role of "pinner" or "booster", they went about their affairs and ignored my presence.<sup>3</sup> Inmates who were fortunate enough to have contraband coffee would often enjoy this in my presence while I visited them in their rooms. And inmates would often stop me on the grounds and ask when I was coming to see them, or inmates might come to the cottage windows as I was walking by and say, "How come you haven't come to see us lately?". The crucial factor in prison research is the investigator's daily conduct.

Sometimes I arrived at a cottage for a scheduled interview only to discover that the inmate had had a "bad day". At such times, I had to forget the purpose of the research, and simply listened to the inmate's gripes for as long as she wished; this meant until she had talked herself out, and sometimes this took as long as two hours. This kind of event can be something of an inconvenience in research. Yet this is something that I learned early in the field work: an observer cannot stop the flow of conversation, even when the observer is not interested, or the conversation irrelevant. To do so would have been interpreted as "not being interested" in the inmates as "people". This meant, of course, that I had to talk to the inmate again. In such instances, I scheduled another interview a week or two later, hoping that the situation had clarified itself.

My willingness to listen to the inmates about any of their problems, ailments, and so on, won me the reputation in the eyes of the inmates as someone "sincere", "pretty understanding", and "easy to talk to". Inmates looked forward to my visits, and when I left they invariably said I could "come anytime to talk". In this way, perhaps I

<sup>2</sup> Cast in the form of a legitimate marriage alliance, the homosexual dyad is the most important structural unit in the female prison.

<sup>3</sup> The "pinner" is a lookout, and the "booster" is an inmate who carries on a successful business enterprise by stealing from official stores.

was useful to the inmates; that is, some of the inmates may have looked upon me as a "visitor" they otherwise would not have had during their incarceration.<sup>4</sup> Apart from this, however, I did nothing for the inmates. I did not carry messages from one inmate to another, although I was sometimes asked to do so in the beginning; nor did I deliver any packages from one inmate to another, although staff members sometimes cooperated in this way. My reason for this was that I wanted to dissociate myself from existing roles in the prison and sustain a one-sided role, namely, that of an *observer* of "institutional living". Furthermore, I did not want to risk the possibility that a message might get distorted and I might find myself part of an inmate squabble.

While it is true that I did not carry messages from one inmate to another, if an inmate mentioned to me that another inmate in a certain cottage wanted to talk to me, I made it a point to look up the inmate that very day, and made an appointment for an interview at her convenience.

The interviewing did not interfere with prison routine. Inmates were not called off the job to talk to me. I made myself available to the inmates on their own time and at their convenience when they were not on the job: during the day, in the evening, and on weekends. I think this helped to distinguish early in the study my role as researcher as quite distinct from staff roles. Moreover, the fact that I did not have any office space in the prison was helpful in this connection.

Conversations with inmates were held, of course, anywhere in the cottages or on the grounds, but the majority of the extended interviews were held in the inmate's room. During the early interviews, sometimes an inmate would open the door and then quickly excuse herself saying that she didn't know I was there. However, this kind of interruption did not occur often after the first ten weeks. Inmates who lived in dormitories were interviewed in the dormitory if privacy was guaranteed, in another inmate's room who had granted permission that her room could be used, or on the grounds if weather and season permitted.

I took notes in the inmate's presence in these sessions. If an inmate showed a reluctance to have her statements recorded (and some inmates

did in the beginning) I said that I wouldn't take notes if she preferred that I didn't, or that she could see my notes before I left. In the few cases where inmates refused to have their statements recorded, I simply put the notebook in my handbag and wrote up the notes from memory at home if I was leaving the prison immediately, or made notes in the ladies' room shortly thereafter.

While the above may seem pretty straightforward, I did make mistakes. For obvious reasons, in the beginning of the study, I did not fully understand the informal social system of the inmates. In my evening interviews which were held in the cottages early in the study, it might be said that I sometimes overstayed my welcome. I recall vividly interviewing a very articulate and cooperative inmate, with whom I had spoken on several occasions, and I was eager to complete the interview that evening. During the evening, an inmate opened the door and excused herself three times. Finally she walked into the room, threw her commissary bag on the bed and exclaimed: "It's nine o'clock!". I learned to terminate my interviews in the evening for appropriate inmates at eight-thirty so that I would not interfere with their informal activities.<sup>5</sup>

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURE WITH STAFF

I spent a good deal of time in the cottages, not only in connection with the interviewing, but I also joined inmates in the living room, in the laundry room, in the long hall, dormitories, as well as just casual visiting with inmates who might call to me from their rooms. Such free and easy coming and going in the cottages (as well as in other parts of the prison) presented an important problem in connection with my interaction with correctional officers, as well as with other staff personnel.

An important decision which I had to make at the outset was in connection with how I would present myself to the staff in the presence of the inmates. Several factors had to be taken into account. In the first place, I did not want my presence to be anxiety-provoking for the correctional officers, although it was obvious that it was in the beginning. In the early days of the study, my presence in the cottages was clearly disturbing to the officers. When I entered a cottage, the

<sup>4</sup> Most women serve their entire sentence without a visit from the outside world. In the year 1962, for example, an examination of the records revealed that 79 inmates or about twelve percent of the inmate population received visits during the entire year.

<sup>5</sup> During this time medicine is dispensed by the correctional officer. Since she cannot leave the office, it is an especially safe period during which inmates may engage in homosexual relations.

officers made apologies, "You're coming to a dirty cottage"; "It's not always like this"; "The girls aren't always so noisy"; and so on. After a few weeks, however, when the officers realized that I did not report *them* any more than I did the inmates, this never occurred. Correctional officers were apprehensive and assumed that I would report behavior which I observed in the cottages, or any complaints that inmates made about them, to the warden or other prison administrators. Hence I avoided contact with top prison administrators on the prison grounds, especially during the first six months, so that correctional officers (and also inmates) would not suspect me of reporting their behavior to prison administrators. Secondly, I needed the cooperation of the staff to carry out my research successfully. And, finally, it was extremely important that I have the sustained confidence and trust of the inmate body.

As far as my behavior toward the staff is concerned, I followed this procedure consistently. In the presence of an inmate, I greeted any staff member who went by, whether or not the inmate did. If I was seated in front of a cottage, and a staff member drove by in a car, I waved to her by way of greeting, whether or not the inmate did. Whenever I entered a cottage, I made my presence known to the officer. Upon entering, I spoke to any inmate who happened to be in sight, stuck my head in the office and greeted the officer. In the evening, the outer door was locked. Since I had no keys, the officer had to open the door which solved the problem. We simply exchanged a few neutral pleasantries, and then I went about my business. When I left a cottage, I always said goodbye to the officer and thanked her. If the officer was on the second floor when I arrived, I hung around the hall talking with the inmates until she appeared. When she came downstairs, I greeted her and continued talking to the inmates for fifteen minutes or so, and then proceeded with whatever I had planned. Very often the inmate with whom I had scheduled an interview would be waiting in the hall for me at the scheduled time. Before going to her room, I would say simply, "I just want to say 'hello' to the officer", and then we would go to her room. None of the officers escorted me to the inmate's quarters, unless the inmate was locked in. I simply looked at name plates until I found the inmate I wanted. And very often inmates gave me directions.

Did these brief encounters with the officers in the cottages have any effect in gaining the confi-

dence of the inmates? My conversations with the officers in the cottage units were always brief, courteous and made in the presence of the inmates. The observer's consistency and openness in approach was obvious to the inmates, and none of them ever questioned these brief encounters with the officers in the cottages. In a real sense, I was merely giving the officers the kind of "respect" that inmates understood.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, whenever I had conversations with inmates, either in the cottages or on the grounds and a staff member approached, I always pointedly halted the conversation until the officer was out of earshot.

While it was necessary for me to confine my contacts with the correctional officers to casual greetings in the cottages, I utilized many other opportunities to have conversations with the officers, as well as prison administrators and staff members in other parts of the prison and at staff meetings. Sometimes, I visited the lieutenant's office in the evening and chatted with whoever happened to be on duty, or chatted with the officer on duty in the control center. I joined officers in the officers' lounge, and I occasionally ate in the staff dining room. Whenever I did, I made it a special point to sit at a different table each time.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, I attended staff meetings, and there were casual encounters with staff personnel in town, in the laundromat, in the local restaurant, in the post office and in their homes. I often walked to the prison; staff members always stopped and picked me up. Staff members would often drive me home. All of these encounters and meetings provided an excellent opportunity to obtain valuable data for the study. Thus, during the first six months, I not only had gained the confidence of the inmates, but also the confidence of the vast majority of the staff on an informal basis. At no time, however, did I intimate to the members of the staff that my casual conversations with them—whether they took place in town, on the grounds,

<sup>6</sup> The inmate normative system specifies that the officer *should* be given "respect," for it is understood that the officer "has a job to do." "Respect" in this context, however, means quite simply to *render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's*. These duties and obligations fall into the realm of custodial functions, namely, getting into line for count when the bell rings; walking to the dining room in an orderly manner, and completing work assignments.

<sup>7</sup> However, I avoided top administrators, such as the warden, associate warden (treatment), and the captain. Whenever they extended invitations to join them, I refused explaining that inmates might misunderstand my presence at the warden's table.

or in a staff member's home, would all be carefully recorded.

#### CONCLUSION

Like the primitive community, the prison society is suspicious of the stranger who appears in its midst and cannot be fitted into one of the existing roles in the status hierarchy. Because of the caste division in which the inmates and the staff are divided, the presence of a researcher without a clearly defined role is fundamentally disturbing. Moreover, the fact that inmates are committed as well as released daily, heightens the problem of obtaining data, and establishing and sustaining rapport becomes a constant and integral factor of prison research. In this setting, the researcher never really "has it made", as it were, but, rather, is always fearful that his interactions with staff members may be misinterpreted by the inmate body. In addition, there is the further problem that correctional workers and other staff members low in the institution's status hierarchy will be suspicious of the researcher's contacts with the administrative personnel. With respect to the latter, it might be pointed out that the reverse process, also, holds true. It is important, therefore, that the researcher gain the trust of the prison staff very early, as the success of his research depends in large measure upon their cooperation.

In my view, the social scientist who plans to conduct a study of the prison community—

whether he employs techniques of participant observation, unstructured interviews, the administration of a questionnaire, or a combination of these techniques—will be faced with considerable difficulty, unless he establishes a role which is independent of the existing roles in the prison. In order to accomplish this, he should under no circumstances carry any keys; his contacts with staff members on the prison grounds should be brief, and whenever possible, made in the presence of inmates. As far as the inmates are concerned, he would do well to confine his association with them to the concerns of obtaining data for the study, that is, it is imperative that he not cooperate by rendering "favors"—even in terms of what seemingly may appear to be an innocent message—as he is certain to place himself in a position where he will be manipulated and ultimately frustrated in his research.

Provided that he can maintain a role which is dissociated from the existing roles in the prison, the chances of acceptance by both the inmates and the staff are excellent. However, I do not think it can be emphasized too strongly that continuous presence in the institution day after day for the first five or six months that the study is in process is essential, not only for the researcher to adjust to the routine of the prison world, but, also, in order for him to achieve acceptance by the members of this community.