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Conducting Research in Irish Prisons: A Review

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Introduction

Research has shown the potential of using the accounts of offenders as a first hand data source (Canter and Ioannou, 2004; Synnott, Canter, Youngs and Ioannou, 2015). Although a large body of literature relating to incarcerated offenders exists, very few publications document or provide guidance concerning the challenges and strategies for researchers conducting studies within prisons (Apa et al., 2012). The aim of this article is to outline the processes involved in carrying out research interviews in prisons. For the purpose of this article the Irish Prison Service¹ (IPS) protocol will be used as an example.

Irish Prison Service

One of the major considerations for researchers conducting research within a prison is time management. Prior to any access being granted to prisoners, clearance for the researcher(s) needs to be sought. In Ireland, clearance is given by the IPS Prisoner Based Research Ethics Committee. The IPS Research Application Form requires background

¹ For information about conducting research in a UK prison see the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) website <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-offender-management-service>

information on the researcher(s), in depth details of the research in question, discussion of all ethical issue, the demands of the research on the prison service, the likely benefits to the prisons service in assisting in this research and all appropriate research documentation supplied. Both this form and the Ethics Guidance Document can be accessed from the IPS website.

Due to a large number of proposals that are submitted to the Research Office within the IPS, the process of gaining access to Irish Prisons can take a number of months to complete. On submission of a proposal, the Research Office will take into account all ethical considerations, the value of the research to the IPS, the time and resources required for the research to be carried out. Within this process the researcher(s) will need to be vetted. The vetting process, carried out by An Garda Síochána (Irish Police Force), is where the researcher(s) has their criminal record checked to make sure that they are appropriate persons to enter into a prison to carry out research. This generally means checking that they have no criminal convictions. As the vetting process relies on the speed of another organisation (An Gardaí) to process, this is another stage that can take a considerable time to pass through.

If the application to carry our research in the prison has been approved, contact with the Governor of the prisons where access is sought needs to be made. The Governor of the prison holds all rights in regards to providing access to the prison and the relationship with them is very important. The presence of a researcher on site has considerable implications for the management of staff and this is something that the researcher must be aware of at all times.

The Liaison Officers

Once communication is established with the Governor, they will want to know about the specific requirements of the research; this includes the number of participants needed, the required demographic background, any exclusion criteria that exists and most importantly the timeframe of the research. Once the Governor is happy for the research to be conducted, a Liaison Officer (LO) will be assigned, whose job is to assist the researcher while on site by helping with recruitment.

In order for the LO to approach potential participants within the prison to take part in the research, they must have all necessary information regarding the research project. In general, they will not be fully briefed on what their role is so it is the responsibility of the

researcher to do this. It is important that the LO is fully aware of the importance of confidentiality if they are going to be directly involved in the recruitment of participants which is standard protocol in the IPS if you are not seeking out specific named individuals. This will ensure clarity and consistency in the information that is given out and will help in the likely recruitment of participants. One way to do this is to provide the LO with an information sheet about the project which can also be shown to the prisoners. This information sheet should contain all relevant information but specifically confidentiality conditions. The general nature of how the recruitment process works within the IPS is that the LO will approach a number of prisoners who he/she thinks might be interested in taking part in the study, based on a loose guideline of the background of individuals you are seeking to speak to e.g. Burglary Offenders. The success of accessing an appropriate sample can depend on how motivated the LO is in assisting the researcher, and also very much on the standing of the LO within the prison population. So their role in regards to the success of the project at this stage is vital.

Conducting the Research in Prison

On the day of conducting research within the prison, the researcher will sign into the prison and will meet the LO at the entrance; waiting time for the LO to collect the researcher must be considered here. Gaining access into the prison and going through security checks can take between five to thirty minutes both in the morning and after lunch. The LO will explain the structure of the day to the researcher and will show the researcher(s) where interviews can take place that day but also the times that they can interview within. It must also be noted that the LO may change from day to day or even during course of the day, so the researcher(s) needs to be ready to brief new individuals in this eventuality. Furthermore, the LO may also have other commitments which may impact on the ability for the researcher to conduct their research, such as attending to any security issues that arise while on site.

The LO will explain the main restrictions of conducting research within the prison. The IPS operates on a standard day across all prisons based around meal times. Breakfast takes place between 8am and 9.30am, lunch from 12.30pm to 2pm and dinner from 4.30 onward. This allows for two time periods in which interviews can be carried out. A 3-hour window between breakfast and lunch and a two-and-a-half-hour period between lunch and dinner. Timing demands will impact the number of individuals that can be interviewed and

the length of time that can be spent with them. Time must also be allocated for the LO to collect the participants and escort them to the interview room, as many of the prisoners may not be in the immediate vicinity.

Interviewing Offenders

During the interview process, a good deal of time needs to be dedicated towards briefing them on the nature of the study, making sure that they completely understand the nature of the confidentiality agreement and that they are comfortable with what is being asked of them. If a Dictaphone is being used to record the interview it must be pointed out to the participant by explaining that no individual other than the present researcher would have access to it. However, bringing a Dictaphone into a prison can present its own challenges and checks will take place when entering the prison to confirm that it is not in any way a mobile phone type of device, which again adds more time onto the security clearance on site. Once everything is explained to each participant and they are happy to take part in the study, consent forms can then be presented and they can then indicate if they wish to partake in the study.

Conclusion

This article aimed to document the process of gaining access to a prison and the factors that need to be considered when conducting interviews within a prison. The material contained within is based on the process that a researcher is likely to encounter if carrying out research within Irish Prisons. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive account but it serves to point out some of the main aspects that researchers should anticipate. Being well informed will allow the researcher(s) to make more intelligent decisions regarding their research plan and will allow for the most effective use of the researchers time.

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