
12-6-2002

Doing Family Research at the Jail: Reflections of a Prison Widow

Joyce A. Arditti

Virginia Tech University, arditti@vt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Arditti, J. A. (2002). Doing Family Research at the Jail: Reflections of a Prison Widow. *The Qualitative Report*, 7(4), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2002.1967>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Doing Family Research at the Jail: Reflections of a Prison Widow

Abstract

In this article, I reflect on my experience running a small family research project at a local jail. I focus on methodological and policy issues inherent in controversial research, as well as my own personal reactions to the criminal justice system. Implications of insider status are discussed as they apply to researcher stance and responsibilities in corrections settings.

Keywords

Fieldwork, Criminal Justice, Methodology, Corrections, and Drug Policy

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Fred Piercy for his encouragement and comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Doing Family Research at the Jail: Reflections of a Prison Widow by Joyce A. Arditti[±]

The Qualitative Report, Volume 7, Number 4 December, 2002

Abstract

In this article, I reflect on my experience running a small family research project at a local jail. I focus on methodological and policy issues inherent in controversial research, as well as my own personal reactions to the criminal justice system. Implications of insider status are discussed as they apply to researcher stance and responsibilities in corrections settings.

Key Words: Fieldwork, Criminal Justice, Methodology, Corrections, and Drug Policy

"What you imagine to be possible has something to do with what is ultimately possible...."
(Wonders, [1996](#), p. 642).

"Experience is messy." ([Wolf](#), 1992, p. 129).

This article is about my experience running a small criminal justice research project and its possible ethical and methodological implications. It is a reflexive paper that is deeply personal and layered, in which I reflect on research and policy issues with my own personal reactions (in italics).

It is about insider status and keeping a distance.

It 's about wanting to "blow it open", wanting to "expose them", wanting to reach the voices of the people that I myself have sat next to for many months, waiting to bring my daughter to see her incarcerated father.

It is about having a political agenda.

It 's about hands pressed up to the glass and talking to Daddy on that "crazy phone!" (I too chose the "It's a Beautiful Life" strategy and made it a game for my children to visit the jail).

It is about hiring 3 interviewers to ask my questions, and my thoughts about telling the story of how incarceration impacts families.

It's about parenting stress and financial strain and dealing with the system.

It's about dirty bathrooms, without a single piece of toilet paper, that stink.

In this paper I juxtapose the subjective and the objective; I dialogue with myself, the researched, and the scholarly community. The manuscript represents a tapestry of sorts—a weaving together of me and "the work"; of thoughts and feelings that bubble and ferment as I do the research, conduct the scholarship, and write this account. The emotions flow out in a diary-like stream of consciousness which I try to refine and connect with the context of criminal justice and how incarceration impacts families. In discussing the role of emotions in the research process, Kathleen Gilbert (2001) observes: "Yet to know the phenomenon about which they write and to be fully honest about how they came to their interpretation, one can argue that it is dishonest not to draw on their own emotional experience ...into the final telling of their "research tale" (p. 11).

This is my research tale. My pain, transmuted by scholarship. My loss, the foundation for documenting the losses of others.

Controversial and Threatening

Lee and Renzetti (1993) discuss the context of conducting sensitive research, equating sensitive as "controversial and threatening." These adjectives resonate for me as I reflect on my own life and current scholarship in the area of criminal justice. In elaborating on the issue of sensitivity, Lee and Renzetti state: "A sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial *threat*, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched, the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data" (1993, p. 5).

I ponder this definition as I sit on the verge of interpreting the data, that is currently in an unthreatening form, contained safely in surveys sitting in a huge pile locked in my cabinet. We are in the data entry stage of a study on the experience of parents and caregivers who are visiting an incarcerated family member. Using a conceptual framework, which acknowledges the losses associated with a parent's incarceration, 56 parent/caregivers visiting an incarcerated family member during children's visiting hours at a local jail were interviewed. The interview gathered family, health, and economic information about the participant and his/her children. Information about legal aspects of the inmate's situation was also collected. This local jail was a particularly attractive site to gather data because it is a holding facility for state and federal prisoners. It was anticipated that many family members were there visiting a state or federal nonviolent offender who was being held at the jail to attend court or housed there because of prison overcrowding (Beck & Mumola, 1999).

I am getting my first whiff of the data and I can already tell it's what I wanted. They are suffering, I want to document and disseminate their suffering.

Lee and Renzetti (1993) identify a number of threats to the researcher and the researched emerging from controversial research. I see the importance of acknowledging these threats, or aspects of controversiality, as part of the context of the research I am doing. Describing the context will help me and others to better understand the research process itself and my interpretation of the findings. Context is important.

Here is what it is like to be a prison widow: it is like going to a funeral that no one attends.

The first threat Lee and Renzetti (1993) identify immediately strikes a chord with me: " where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience..." (p. 5).

The site for the jail research was chosen, because I had discovered it existed. My relationship with my daughter's father had brought me crashing headlong into the jail: a place, like so many others in my comfortable middle-class world, I would not have frequented or understood had it not been for him. He is a federal prisoner, and was held at this jail when he was called for Grand Jury testimony, and again as he waited the agonizing months to be convicted and sentenced for his offense. I knew exactly who to call for permission to conduct the research, and what to expect there.

Six years after his imprisonment, with more time to go, I still dream of him-usually I am attempting to visit him or trying to get him out. Once I dreamt I was actually locked up with him inside the jail and we were both chained to the bunk bed. Sometimes in my dreams we are free. Once I dreamed he, I and our daughter were swimming in a beautiful turquoise-blue lake. But he is always gone when I awake and I am alone.,.I wonder if the research is a way to keep him close--a way to make him real out here.

My experience at the jail was intensely personal: I had waited in the visiting room many times with my children. That part of me, the part that I will call "my personal experience with the criminal justice system" is life changing and raw. This sort of research is threatening: it took a year to get the nerve up to write a research proposal on how the criminal justice system affects families. I think it helped that Fred Piercy, my new department head, encouraged me. He said: "You are the one to do this work." He saw my level of personal experience as a strength, something I will reflect and elaborate on in the next section of this article. Fred believed that I was the one to do this research. Did I? I was concerned about whether I was strong enough to do it.

I am a woman who lost her man to a system that everyone pretends does no harm.

I am still wounded.

But I knew what I could have in the data: documentation, finally. After extensive review of the empirical literature, our conclusion in Arditti and McClintock (2001) was that we know virtually nothing in family studies about the experience of drug offenders and their families. They are basically left off the family preservation agenda, and outside the discourse, even in the most enlightened discussions about family policy (Arditti, 2001). We had called upon researchers to respond to the dearth of information about the experiences of families and how incarceration might impact parenting, family relationships, and economic stability. I realize that this lack of information was due in part to the sensitive nature of the topic under study. Indeed, Renzetti and Lee note: "the difficulties associated with sensitive research have tended to inhibit adequate conceptualization and measurement..." (1993, p. 6).

How visible did I want to be with regard to collecting the data and disseminating the findings? Wasn't it safer to just hide behind the mask of an unknown scholar and publish the findings in obscure academic publications?

I knew who I was: an insider who was disillusioned with system and the invisibility of its families, and painfully aware of what it meant to have loved and had a child with a drug offender.

The second aspect of controversial research Lee and Renzetti identify is also clearly applicable to the project: "where the study is concerned with deviance and social control" (1993, p. 5). This study is concerned with the impact of incarceration on family members visiting a prisoner. The study was particularly focused on learning more about the family members of drug offenders and demonstrating the harms resulting from criminal sanction policy.

See the harm? See my little girl? She Is fatherless. Whose fault is that? Who is to blame?

It is a challenge not to be bitter.

There is a large literature on the use of incarceration as a means of controlling the "dangerous classes" (Sheldon, 2001). In fact, one of the major functions of the criminal justice system has been largely to manage those from the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. Throughout history, prohibition laws have focused mostly on "the dangerous classes" -and our current drug policies are no exception. The drug war is a broad gateway into the criminal justice system extending our notions of deviance (through an ever expanding list of substances and activities- previously gone unnoticed), effectively controlling minorities, and marginalizing certain groups of people from important opportunity structures (Arditti & McClintock, 2001).

He has been moved again, this time to a federal camp only 5 hours away. He is unhappy because he has to dig ditches in 105 degree heat. The other day, he tells me he was working outside across from a swimming pool and health club-- a place not unsimilar to where we used to belong in another life. But now he is an outsider looking in. He is a prisoner in a hard hat wearing a shirt that has FPC emblazened on it. He is marked and he can't go swimming this summer. He is locked out of life.

For example, in our research, my colleague and I discovered considerable agreement among criminologists that drug control policies account for most of the increase of the U.S. prison population, largely through incarceration of nonviolent, lower level drug offenders (Duster, 1995; Lynch & Sabol, 2000; Sabol & Lynch, 1997). We also emphasized that given the political popularity of tough drug policies; incarceration of drug offenders provides the "raw material" to sustain demand for a prison-industrial complex in the U.S, especially through its disproportionate impact on less powerful groups such as minorities and women. Some scholars contend that racism has been a core feature of nearly every drug scare throughout history and incarceration rate data show this trend continuing (see also Austin & Irwin, 2001). Indeed, it has recently been argued that criminal justice policies of postindustrial America are the preferred methods for managing the rising inequality and surplus populations of the United States (Barak, Flavin, & Leighton, 2001). In their extensive analysis of the connections between class, race, gender, and

crime, Barak et. al. conclude that legal and extra-legal mechanisms of control are used differentially on those "marginal groups perceived as threatening to dominant groups in society" (p. 237). Similar to our conclusions with regard to drug offenders, they point out that in terms of what should be done about the "dangerous underclass", the prevailing view has primarily revolved around "getting tough." Our love affair with incarceration has resulted in many costs, perhaps the least visible involving the toll on children and families of prisoners.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) discuss fieldwork having its roots in studying deviance and "hidden pockets of society." Going out into the field, talking with participants in the jail setting as they waited, created a variety of emotions for the interviewers ranging from disgust, empathy, concern for the children, and even a hopeful optimism that these families would somehow overcome. We had entered into one of those hidden pockets-created by their own family member's "deviance" and the imposition of social control by the criminal justice system.

All of these issues intertwine with the third aspect of controversiality identified by Lee and Renzetti " where it impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination" (1993, p. 5). Prison is an absolute exercise of coercion and domination.

City jail prisoners are rarely brought outside despite the "recreation area" available on the roof. They breathe no fresh air. My daughter's father tells me the jail is like "hell with a telephone."

Austin and Irwin (2001) provide a succinct description of the prison experience today: "convicted primarily of property and drug crimes, 1.3 million prisoners and another 600,000 jailed inmates are being crowded into human (or inhuman) warehouses where they are increasingly deprived, restricted, isolated, and consequently embittered and alienated from conventional worlds..." (p. 90). Our current emphasis on punishment rather than rehabilitation has created a situation whereby prisoners have not only lost much of their physical mobility within the prison, as well as access to prison facilities and resources, but they are also housed in remote locations for lengthy periods of time. This isolation has resulted in diminished contact from most of the services historically offered to prisoners from churches and other support organizations as well as estrangement from one's family (Austin & Irwin, 2001).

Finally, Lee and Renzetti (1993) discuss controversy "where it deals with things sacred to those studied..." (p. 5). With the exception of Gary Johnson, the governor of New Mexico, no politician of significant stature has challenged the sacred war on drugs. (In a recent interview with *Reason* magazine, Johnson admits his critique of drug control strategies is political suicide in terms of his future). It seems clear that the war on drugs is not to be "profaned" as reflected by the nomination of drug warrior John Walters for Drug Czar, the appointment of right conservative John Ashcroft for Attorney General, and the recent 8-0 Supreme Court ruling against the Oakland Buyers Club that distributed marijuana to seriously ill patients in California. The White House is geared up for a four-year intensification of failed drug war strategies.

If it wasn't so tragic, it would almost be funny. Why can't we be more like Canada?

Our reactions to setting and participants are affected by societal views as well as the value given it by sociologists at the time (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). The "tainting" phenomena created by

mass imprisonment been discussed elsewhere (see for example Lynch & Sabol, [2000](#)) and this tainting extends to family members and children as well. I had seen little in sociology suggesting a concern for the population under study....I had seen little in the mainstream literature suggesting that the drug war was "bad" for families. However my own experience and the reaction of my colleagues encouraged me to go forward...that while outside of academia the drug war raged, within its confines there was an emerging consensus, at least amongst criminologists and other scholars who seriously considered this issue, that our incarceration binge and drug war mentality may not only compromise civil liberties and the integrity of our justice system, but also have negative effects on families.

While drug control strategies relying on criminal sanctions are considered "sacred" by some, a reform consciousness is slowly gaining momentum that demonstrates the welfare of children and families, and ultimately the community, is harmed by their use. I had been teaching about the drug war for 5 years now in my Family Law and Public Policy class, carefully leading my students through an exercise in critical thinking.

I was continually amazed how most of the students had never even questioned how we do business, the stereotypes that were held regarding crime including the belief that most prisoners were violent criminals who deserved to rot in prison, and a reluctance to even question the war on drugs, because once going there, once the hidden costs became visible and one saw it as nothing more than a house of cards based on lies, distortions, and propaganda, students were ultimately disillusioned and disturbed.

This research project was another way for me to question the sacred war on drugs. I must admit I was afraid of repercussions from the jail, worried about reactions from the academic community, and concerned I would not find an effective outlet for its findings. I was excited by the work of feminists in the area of criminal justice...with their concern about social justice and oppression and call for the engagement of "persistent critique of what one is up to when one calls on the state to punish" (Howe, [1994](#), p. 217). I particularly liked how Wonders ([1996](#)) deconstructed the "old story" of determinant sentencing, and offered a "new story" about sentencing, one that departs from widely held assumptions about crime, justice, and punishment. The old story ignores the "legislators discretion to decide who is a 'criminal' and who is not" (p. 627). The "new story" emphasizes "the construction of the criteria that are used to distinguish between people. There are no neutral criteria..." (p. 627).

I thus embraced the feminist notion of "storytelling" for this project because it implicitly offered a critique of objectivity. Storytelling is a metaphor for the "subjective and transitory nature of all truth" ; reality is continuously being written and constructed and rewritten (Wonders, [1996](#), p. 614). Feminists historically challenged those things held sacred.

Thank God I wasn't the only one questioning things. I want to offer a "new story" about the drug war-a story of failed policies, institutionalized bureaucracies, and inhumanity. A story of children who show up every Saturday to visit their parent or family member, who line up to play with our toys, who tell us they miss their daddy, of mothers who are tired, overburdened, and left completely off the agenda for family preservation. A story of people who can't grieve openly,

who are shamed, and suffer silently known only to each other within the visiting room walls. This is a story I knew.

I want to break the social silence in my field regarding drug control . I want to raise consciousness regarding due process and freedom. Why are some drug users criminalized? Why is marijuana outlawed as medicine and Prozac embraced?

Drugs are so obviously a criterion used to distinguish between people, to weed out the counterculture, to lock up minorities, to fill up empty prison beds in overbuilt states, to satisfy the hunger for punishment and self-righteousness. I want to say out loud that the emperor has no clothes. Like Wonders, I imagine something else is possible, and the only way to begin is to help deconstruct the "old story."

Along with feminists, I had other company on the academic path deconstructing the "old story" of crime and punishment, drugs and deviance. When I recently attended the national conference of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) ([2001](#)) I was struck by the title and description of the following session: "Convict Criminology: Questioning the Quality of Justice Experienced by Defendants and Prisoners." Imagine, the emergence of a special discipline....convict criminology....in criminal justice academe. This movement reflects the growing acceptance and even desirability of the use of self to conduct research and develop discourse around issues pertaining to the social control. "Convict criminology" encompasses essays and empirical research written by convicts or ex-convicts, many with academic degrees themselves or work written by "enlightened academics" who critique existing literature, policies and practice. The leaders of this "new criminology" are ex-convicts who are now academic faculty. According to the program description, convict scholars are believed to be able to do what others could not....merge their past with their present and provide a provocative approach to the academic study of criminology, criminal justice, and corrections. Convict criminology is part of the "new story" and challenges conventional research of the past. I welcome this scholarship.

I too was a part of the new convict criminology---not in the sense that I had worn a prison uniform-but could certainly say that I had "done my time" as family members do. We all do the time in some fashion along with the prisoner. Richards and Ross ([2001](#)) describe various categories of convict criminologists based on the existing literature providing an inside perspective. They fail however, to explicitly recognize an emerging group of scholars with stories and sensitivities of their own. This group, largely composed of convicts' family members, emphasizes the concerns of families and children impacted by incarceration. We are the spouses, lovers, parents, children, and siblings of prisoners and like the convict academicians, we are committed to reform, critical scholarship, and civilized corrections. My experience with the system, my losses and pain, my anger, prompted me to critique the system with an intensity similar to the ex-con's. I am an "enlightened academic" because I am a prison widow.

I think of my colleague, A, an assistant professor of criminal justice. She called me this morning to invite me to sit on a panel about family visitation in the jails at a national conference next year. Her son is imprisoned. Another colleague B, is trying to learn the criminal justice literature, and has expressed interest in collaborating with me given his new found interest in

incarceration. He is a well-respected family scholar. Last week, he e-mails me confessing his "bias" against the system. He admits that his son is imprisoned.

I tell him: "I don't think your experience is biased; I think it is meaningful and real and will inform your scholarship."

I mean, how else would we know? Why else would we care?

Identity, Personal Experience, and Political Agenda

Kleinman and Copp (1993) talk about being "more than just a researcher"-noting the conventional image of a researcher as someone who neutralizes her identities and viewpoints while conducting research. Of course, they point out that our identities and life experiences shape the political and ideological stances we take in our research. Honoring the subjective allows for the inclusion of emotions in the research process-not just of the participants but of the researcher. Harris and Huntington (2001) discuss how a focus on emotions as a key source of insight may lead one to undertake research that produces "different sources of knowledge" (p. 136). Tapping into the emotional experience is a potentially powerful tool for analysis.

How ironic that this man, my daughter's father, "the peaceful pot grower", has so dramatically altered my life and my thinking. I have undergone a political transformation....once a liberal, comfortably aligned with the left, I now call myself "classically conservative" or "libertarian". I have changed. I ask different questions now and look in unexpected, less familiar places for answers. I am critical and mistrustful of government. I am cautious about asking them to "help" families.

While I am encouraged by the tenets of qualitative inquiry, especially by the writing of those researchers studying controversial topics (see for example Thorne's 1983 work on the Vietnam draft resistance movement), I still feel conflicted to some extent by the positivist imperative that I be "objective."

It's hard to undo my methodological socialization. I know I hold back...

Kleinman and Copp (1993) note that we often omit our identity from our published accounts because we want to present ourselves as social scientists: objective and neutral observers. This is tempting for me...it certainly is an easier path than to "identify myself." Gilbert (2001) also articulates the fear that subjective work will be rejected as inadequate.

I attend a meeting this summer and am part of an impressive group of experts. I have been invited because of my expertise in criminal justice and families. We are focusing on the experience of low-income parents and I emphasize the overlap between poverty and incarceration as well as many families' mistrust of law enforcement and the system. I want to tell everyone at the table more of who I really am, and the real source of my knowing, but my instincts tell me "not now." I try and stick with my data. Later on the phone, when my daughter's father questions why I don't tell them about my experience, I admit that I am afraid. I fear that it will somehow make what I have to say less credible. He disagrees: he says, on the contrary, it

would make me more credible. He says: I thought your field accepted the role of personal experience.

I am not so sure.

The jail project has raised important questions for me concerning how I want to be perceived and the implications of my identity for my research. In a sense, it seems I have an ethical responsibility to "come out", not only in terms of my political ideology, but also in terms of my identity as a "prison widow." Risky as it feels to expose myself in this way to the academic community and beyond, not telling seems inauthentic. My identity and experiences obviously impact my lens, my interpretation of the data, my filtering of the interviewers experience, the vision I bring to the project and the goals I have regarding its findings. Kleinman and Copp (1993) discuss extensively how our experience informs our analysis -how our research can be a way for us to make meaning of our experience. It felt safer as a divorce researcher (with divorced parents and divorced myself) for me to call upon researchers to identify themselves to better understand their research (see Arditti, 1999). Divorce is more socially acceptable than incarceration. And I only shared a few sentences of personal information as I discussed the need to move beyond a deficit approach in studying divorce-related issues. I said this after years of publishing research in the area and gaining respect as a divorce researcher. It was not a risky proposition to let the academic community know who I was regarding divorce, and why I actively sought alternative interpretations on its impact on families.

I think critiquing the drug war (and its inhumane system of punishment) is also in a sense challenging positivism, something I had comfortably done in my divorce research.

I was "more than just a researcher" relative to my jail families project, and I could not possibly omit myself completely. I was "in" every aspect of the project, from the choice of the city jail site, to the hiring and training of the interviewers, to the development of interview questions. Getting "rid of myself" would be counterproductive and artificial, and frankly, boring. Kleinman and Copp (1993) note how even ethnographic writing is "surprisingly boring" citing Pratt who asks "How...could such interesting people doing such interesting things produces such dull books?" (p. 56). Indeed, Krieger (1985) states that the great injustice regarding the relationship between the researcher and the researched, "does not come about through the use of the self, but through lack of use of the self which...produces a stifled, artificial, limited, and unreal knowledge of others" (p. 320).

I'm a lot of things, but I'm not dull.

I knew I would write several empirical papers from the data, and could easily hide if I wanted to- but I realize now that I do not want to hide anymore. I want others to *really know*. I felt emboldened by qualitative sociology's claim that the uniqueness of our identity is a strength. I wanted to have an impact that went beyond reporting the findings and publishing in academia. I wanted others to have confidence that my "interpretations ring true", that I am able to tell the story, and that something very important is being addressed, *not only because it has affected me personally, but because it has impacted so many others.*

Feminism gave me a home and some level of protection with regard to the stance I take in directing my project, interpreting the findings, and disseminating its results. Although my research in the area of divorce and criminal justice had provided a framework for the interview used in my family prison project, it was my experience that really gave me insight in terms of what to ask them. I had more questions for them than I could ask during the interview session. I trained my interviewers to be fast, reassuring, and empathetic.

Do you think your family member's incarceration has created or solved any problems for your family? What is easier or harder for you to do as a parent since your family member's incarceration? What type of offense is your family member being held at the city jail for? Does your family member have a probation officer? Have you had any contact with this person? When did you go on financial assistance? Does your family member have a private attorney or public defender? Is he or she here because he/she couldn't post bond? Is your family member here on state or federal charges? At what point in the adjudication process is your family member?

I know every step of the adjudication process.

Fine (1992) provides a vocabulary for disclosure in qualitative research in her discussion of 3 stances feminist researchers can take in their work: ventriloquy, voices, and activism-and invites researchers to commit to activism. These stances exist on a continuum from safe to dangerous-anonymity to self-disclosure. On the safe end is ventriloquy: the "whiting out" of authorship whereby researchers' privileges and interests are camouflaged. Ventriloquy means never having to say "I"

Voices are a more subtle form of ventriloquism....within such narratives, authors appear to let the Other speak, and "just under the covers of those marginal-if now liberated voices-we hide, unproblematical" (Fine, 1992, p. 215). Fine concludes that voices offer a decoy. "as such researchers mystify the way we select, use, and exploit voices" (1992, p. 219). Fine clarifies that her critique of voices is not to deny the legitimacy of rich interview material and thick description, but urges us to worry collectively about a failure to explicate our own stances and relations to these voices.

The third stance Fine describes constitutes "activist" research characterized to positioning researchers as self-conscious and "engaged with but still distinct from our informants" (1992, p. 220). She calls upon researchers to take critical, activist, and open stances in their work rather than risk colluding in reproducing "social silences" through social science. What resonates most for me is that such research commits to and is provocative of change...consistent with my goal of telling a new story. But an activist stance can be a dangerous one. I could end up stigmatizing myself. Indeed, Adler and Adler (1993) acknowledge there are times when researchers risk incurring the stigma of their subjects on themselves, especially when they research controversial topics that carry "deviant overtones" such as sex or drugs. To avoid contagion, Adler and Adler observe that ethnographers may have to minimize their discussions of the extent of their "personal participation and involvement in....the setting and its members" (p. 261). How could I rectify the risk of contagion with the call to be an "engaged" researcher?

I feel inauthentic as a ventriloquist. I know I won't go there. I feel safest in a "voices" mode, but that too seems to lack genuineness and fails to achieve the provocation for change that is so important to me. After reading Fine, it seems unethical to hide-even behind my interviewers and the data. I have no choice but to confess. I have to be honest, despite the risk of contagion. I can't escape it, so why not embrace it? Not being present in the work will mirror the very silencing I am trying to pry open.

I accept Fine's invitation to "come clean" and passionately involve myself in my research---to bring my politics into my scholarship and let others know who I am. It is dangerous, but also shakes things up a bit and injects interest and vitality into academia. And in a sense, if my colleagues are to seriously consider my research findings, the story of criminal justice and families, I have a responsibility to tell them who I am first.

But, how close is too close?

Piercy and Fontes ([2001](#)) talks about the ethical dilemma of being too close. The dilemma is whether qualitative researchers should share personal experiences with regard to the research topic-bringing the researcher closer to the subjects, helping them feel more comfortable and understood. But to feel understood, there is also a manipulative element: when we self-disclose we make the subject more likely to share their experiences. Is such manipulation unethical? There were times when interviewee's were less than enthusiastic about participating in the study and this was exacerbated by the requirements of the IRB. The informed consent (required by the IRB) seemed like a barrier between the interviewer and the participant putting them on guard. In order to put interviewees at greater ease, several times when a subject was reluctant to participate, interviewers shared with potential subjects the fact that I had a family member who was incarcerated and had sat in that visiting room. I had suggested they share this information with potential participants. The fact that the lead researcher was "one of them....hence my desire to tell their stories and try and improve things....", had a definite impact on reluctant participants, and several did ultimately participate when they heard this.

Was sharing, via proxy, that I was one of them, manipulative? Possibly in the sense that I knew they would be reluctant to talk to outsiders about such sensitive information...especially information pertaining to the specifics of their family member's case. Did I get too close? Or did the interviewers themselves provide enough distance between me and them? I knew at some point I would rub against each participant and hear them...when I finally got my hands on the data. I had posed my questions, based on what I knew of the scholarly literature and the glaring gaps concerning their experiences which I filled in based on what I knew from my experience as a "prison widow."

Is *not sharing* any less manipulative? In contrast to using my insider status to my advantage with potential participants, I purposely did not share this information with the jail administration when I applied for permission to do the research. I thought it would lessen the likelihood that I would gain entry and thus relied solely on my academic status and identity.

There is little compassion for the prisoner, or the family that he or she leaves behind. Once during a meeting about the research, the sheriff who runs the jail tells me: " I have no sympathy for the girlfriends and wives...they knew what their men were doing."

To this day, the jail personnel still do not know that I was a visitor at their facility; they only know me as "the professor."

In sum, I had consciously decided not to get too close to participants --it would be far too painful to go back weekly to the city jail....even as a researcher. If I went myself, I might possibly prevent the research team from seeing alternative viewpoints-such as any possible benefits incarceration might have for families. I was more than just a researcher, so why pretend? I put the research team squarely between me and the jail-motivated more as a means of dealing with my strong emotions rather than a conscious attempt to build in "objectivity" to the study. The result is an interesting balance of intimacy and distance-similar to the strategy employed by Schmid and Jones's study of prison adaptation (2001). Jones, a Supermax prisoner himself at the time of the research, had experiences very much like the prisoners he interviewed and began to have emotional conflicts dealing with the roles of researcher and inmate. Schmid, a faculty member at a nearby university, provided a balance to the study by maintaining a "sense of detachment" and prodded Jones to search for interpretations that Jones might not have made on his own. Having four "takes" on the data (the interviewers and me) triangulated the data collection, manipulation, and interpretive process. I believe this approach ultimately strengthened the study: a compromise between omitting myself completely and being in the trenches.

Beyond Data Collection

It became clear relatively early on, that our presence at the city jail was evolving into more than just data collection. During my frequent conversations with the interviewers, I learned that relationships were being formed between the research team and the interviewees and their children. I had structured the project so that 1-2 undergraduate students went along with the research team to play with the children there. The original intent was to attract interviewees and "free them up" to talk with us during their wait.

The interviewers' field notes provided rich and poignant description regarding the issue of leaving the children, highlighting the complications arising when researching families in correctional settings. Parents, caregivers and children....most of us were dealing with issues connected to traumatic separation (see for example Johnston, 1995). Entering the setting, only to depart soon thereafter seems now in retrospect like rubbing salt in the wound. I am not convinced that the interviewers' parting discussions with the children ("we are going to try and work things out so we can come back and play") were enough. We had aroused something from the children and families there-hope perhaps-and I certainly did not want to add to their heap of disappointments, even in a small way. But at the beginning of the project, I believed that giving them *something* -even if it was only for 10 weeks, was better than nothing. I am not sure now.

I want to honor my promise to help them somehow.... If I can get the jail to clean up the bathroom, get some toilet paper, work out a way for volunteers to play with the never-ending stream of children waiting to visit on Saturday.....

There are several issues involved in leaving the field including the connection between the personal commitment of the researcher and participants' expectations. Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) discuss that often times our commitment to those we study subsides upon completing the research, and is overshadowed quickly by other considerations. I nod my head as I read this-- how true this is for me now that we are done collecting data, and my anger dissipates as I become more distant from the jail, paralleling my estrangement from my daughter's father. Indeed, Kleinman and Copp (1993) view emotion as necessary and essential to the research process. They question the possibility of effective social critique when researchers detach or numb themselves from their emotions.

I want to forget the city jail, I want to forget the war on drugs, and I want to forget about the criminal justice system so that I can recover and be OK again.

Can I move on without totally numbing out?

"Feeling better" involves to some extent, distancing myself from the very people I committed to somehow help with my research. This is an unspoken caveat of my insider status. As an insider I need to move on. As a researcher, I promised to "do something" for the families at the jail. I can see how I need to "stay angry" in order to advance the research in a meaningful way--including implementing outreach or more in-depth study of families visiting an incarcerated individual. Ironically, a successful outreach effort in the future could be negatively affected if I publicize the findings with regard to the visiting experience for families waiting at the jail. In exposing the concerns of the families we interviewed, I run the risk of alienating the jail making the likelihood of implementing outreach difficult. Punch (1986) discusses the ethics around breaking privacy for institutions that one claims should be more "accountable," particularly tempting for those of us with a reform agenda. While he does not see an answer to this dilemma, he does acknowledge that exposure could close doors rather than open them--yet another ethical quandary facing me with regard to what I might say about the jail, and where I might disseminate the findings.

It seems then, that conducting controversial and threatening research involves the necessity of acknowledging and managing a variety of conflicting goals. I have already explicated on the tension involved in representing myself openly and genuinely in the research, problems associated with the risk of contagion, and briefly touched on issues connected with entering and leaving the setting. In closing, I have tried to identify the dilemmas that face me given the controversial nature of the topic under study and my experience as a prison widow. The threats feel multifaceted as I mull over disseminating the findings, how much to divulge who I am, and how best to fulfill my responsibilities as a researcher, including keeping my promises to the researched. In one sense, my reflections are a form of self-indulgence -similar to James Framo's 1968 confessional "My Families, My Family" in which he reflects on family dynamics in a family he is offering therapy to as well as his own childhood. He describes the article as a kind of "self-indulgent labor of love and pain" (p. 18). I have a similar sentiment about what I write in this manuscript. On the other hand, I believe that much of what I write transcends me, and

highlights the tensions which characterize family research in criminal justice settings as well as the strengths and limitations of insider status. I hope the issues I have raised and my disclosure about my life will provide an authentic foundation for me to disseminate the findings of the project at the jail. More broadly, I hope that my writing contributes to an even more inclusive "convict criminology", one which not only challenges and deconstructs crime control strategies in the United States, but recognizes how families are impacted by incarceration.

References

- Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. *Conference Proceedings*, April 3-7, 2001, Washington, DC.
- Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1993). Ethical issues in self-censorship: Ethnographic research on sensitive topics. In C. Renzetti & R. Lee (Eds.), *Researching sensitive topics* (pp. 249-266). Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Arditti, J. A. (1999). Parental divorce and young adults' intimate relationships: Toward a new paradigm. *Marriage and Family Review*, 29, 35-55.
- Arditti, J. A. (2001). Introduction: Criminal justice and families. *Marriage and Family Review*, 32(3), 3-11.
- Arditti, J. A., & McClintock, C. (2001). Drug policy and families: Casualties of the war. *Marriage and Family Review*, 32(3), 11-33.
- Austin, J., & Irwin, J. (2001). *It's about time: America's imprisonment binge*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth.
- Barak, G., Flavin, J. M., Leighton, P. S. (2001). *Class, race, gender, and crime: Social realities of justice in America*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Beck, A. J., & Mumola, C. J. (1999, August). Prisoners in 1998. *Bureau of Justice Bulletin* (NCJ 175687). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Duster, T. (1995). The new crisis of legitimacy in controls, prisons, and legal structures. *The American Sociologist*, 26(1), 1-29.
- Fine, M. (1992). Passions, politics, and power: Feminist research possibilities. In M. Fine (Ed.), *Disruptive voices: The possibilities of feminist research* (pp. 205-231). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Framo, J. (1968). My families, my family. *Voices: The arts and science of psychotherapy*, 4, 18-27.
- Gilbert, K. R. (2001). Introduction: Why are we interested in emotions? In K. R. Gilbert (Ed.), *The emotional nature of qualitative research* (pp. 3-15). Washington DC: CRC Press.

Harris, J., & Huntington, A. (2001). Emotions as analytic tools: Qualitative research, feelings, and psychotherapeutic insight. In K. R. Gilbert (Ed.), *The emotional nature of qualitative research* (pp. 129-145). Washington DC: CRC Press.

Howe, A. (1994). *Punish and critique: Towards a feminist analysis of penalty*. New York: Routledge.

Johnston, D. (1995). Effects of parental incarceration. In K. Gabel & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Children of incarcerated parents* (pp. 59-88). New York: Lexington.

Kleinman, S., & Kopp, M. A. (1993). *Emotions and fieldwork*. Newbury Park CA: Sage.

Krieger, S. (1985). Beyond subjectivity: The use of the self in social science. *Qualitative Sociology*, 8, 309-324.

Lee, R. M., & Renzetti, C. M. (1993). The problems of researching sensitive topics: An overview and introduction. In C. Renzetti & R. Lee (Eds.), *Researching sensitive topics* (pp. 3-13). Newbury Park CA: Sage.

Lynch, J. P., & Sabol, W. J. (2000). Prison use and social control. *Policies, Processes, and Decisions of the Criminal Justice System*, 3, 7-44. Retrieved December 30, 2002, from http://www.ncjrs.org/criminal_justice2000/vol_3/03b.pdf

Piercy, F., & Fontes, L. (2001). Teaching ethical decision-making in qualitative research: a learning activity. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 20(4), 37-46.

Punch, M. (1986). *The politics and ethics of fieldwork*. Newbury, CA: Sage.

Richards, S., & Ross, J. (2001). Introducing the new school of convict criminology. *Social Justice*, 28, 177-190.

Sabol, W. J., & Lynch, J. P. (1997). *Crime policy report: Did getting tough on crime pay?* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Schmid, T. J., & Jones, R. S. (2001). Ambivalent actions: Prison adaptation strategies of first-time, short-term inmates. In C. Pope, R. Lovell, & S. Brandl (Eds.), *Voices from the field: Readings in criminal justice research* (pp. 182-201). Belmont CA: Wadsworth.

Shaffir, W. B., & Stebbins, R. A. (1991). Leaving and keeping in touch. In W. B. Shaffir & R. A. Stebbins (Eds.), *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research* (pp. 207-210). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sheldon, R. G. (2001). *Controlling the dangerous classes*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Thorne, B. (1983). Political activist as participant observer: Conflicts of commitment in a study of the draft resistance movement of the 1960's. In R. M. Emerson (Eds.), *Contemporary field research* (pp. 216-234). Boston: Little, Brown.

Wolf, M. (1992). *A thrice-told tale: Feminism, postmodernism, and ethnographic responsibility*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Wonders, N. A. (1996). Determinate sentencing: A feminist and postmodern story. *Justice Quarterly*, 13, 613-648.

Author Note

⁺Joyce A. Arditti, Ph.D. received her doctorate in Family Studies from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her research interests include family disruption, parent-child relationships, and public policy. Her scholarship in the area of divorce is recognized nationally and abroad and she has published numerous empirical and review articles in therapy, human services, and family studies journals. She serves on the editorial boards of *Family Relations*, *Marriage and Family Review*, and *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*.

She is a long-time member of the *National Council on Family Relations* and more recently joined *The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences* in 1999. Her current work emphasizes the impact of the criminal justice system on families and she has presented the results of her research on mothers and children visiting an incarcerated family member to academic and lay audiences. She also has several forthcoming manuscripts related to the effects of incarceration on families.

Joyce lives in the mountains of Virginia with her son and daughter, and is a hiking enthusiast and avid biker. She can be contacted at 311 Wallace Hall, Department of Human Development, Blacksburg, Va. 24061 and her email is: arditti@vt.edu.

The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Fred Piercy for his encouragement and comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.