



Article

# Doing research in immigration removal centres: Ethics, emotions and impact

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## Abstract

Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) are deeply contested institutions that rarely open their doors to independent research. In this article we discuss some of the complications we faced in conducting the first national British study of everyday life in them. As we will set out, research relationships were difficult to forge due to low levels of trust and unfamiliarity with academic research. At the same time, many participants had unrealistic expectations about our capacity to assist while most exhibited high levels of distress. We were not immune from the emotional burden of the field sites. Such matters were compounded by the limited amount of published information about life in IRCs and a lack of ethical guidelines addressing such places. Drawing on related literature from prison sociology, we use our experiences in IRCs to set out a methodological account of understanding, ethics, and impact within these complex sites.

## Keywords

Emotions, ethics, immigration removal centres, impact, research methods, trust

## Introduction

Each year, around 32,000 foreign nationals are held in a series of Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) across Britain. Corresponding to a daily incarceration rate of 3500 women and men, this is a heterogeneous population, united only in their lack of British citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Some detainees are ex-prisoners, others asylum seekers, still others have

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violated the terms of their original visa. A number of the women and men may never have possessed any legal documentation, having entered the country irregularly.

Confined under Immigration Act powers, most detainees are awaiting deportation or removal. While around two-thirds of the 50 per cent who leave, depart within 28 days, the rest remain for longer periods. There is no statutory upper limit to how long someone can be held in such places in Britain. As a result, nobody knows quite how long their detention will last. Such uncertainty is profoundly unsettling and is a key defining characteristic of these institutions (APPG, 2015; Bosworth, 2014; Bosworth and Vannier, 2016).

The British government, like many others, claims that detention is a necessary part of managing migration (Home Office, 2015). Yet, critics have marshalled a formidable challenge to this view. Thus, reports from the voluntary sector (Detention Action, 2014; Medical Justice, 2007), government agencies (HMIP, 2012), committees (AAPG, 2015), as well as scholarship from healthcare practitioners (McLoughlin and Warin, 2008; Mares and Jureidini 2004), sociologists (Silverman and Massa, 2012), criminologists (Bosworth, 2014; Bosworth and Kellezi, 2013), geographers (Gill, 2009), anthropologists and political scientists (Griffiths, 2014; Hall, 2012) tell a different story. Detention, they argue, is ineffective, unjust and harmful for physical and mental health (Shaw, 2016).

Notwithstanding the volume and vigour of debate over these sites, information about daily life within them is limited. The state and the custodial companies who run them rarely permit independent scholars to visit (although see Bosworth, 2014; Hall, 2012) and so evidence about them must be gleaned either from reports by NGOs or government agencies, interviews with ex-detainees (Griffiths, 2013), discussions held in visit halls (Griffiths, 2014), brief site visits (e.g. HMIP, 2015) and telephone calls. While much of this literature has contributed important ideas to our understanding of detention, as the field of scholarship develops somewhat apart from empirical investigation, quite basic questions arise about accuracy and interpretation. What can we really know about the nature of these places without independent, applied research within them?

It is not simply a matter of getting the facts right, even if that were possible. Rather, as academic research on prisons has amply demonstrated, accounts of daily life inside allow us to think through a range of complex moral, philosophical and sociological matters such as legitimacy, power, race and gender (Crewe, 2009; Kaufman, 2015; Liebling, 2004; Philips, 2010; Sparks et al., 1996). Description in other words, illuminates purpose and effect. It is also crucial for informing political and public debate, since as we have witnessed elsewhere in regard to prisons, when research access declines, so too does critical commentary (Hannah-Moffat, 2010; Wacquant, 2002).

As it turns out, quite basic questions about detention reveal a profound uncertainty at their core. Those who live or work in IRCs often find it hard to comprehend them. Their daily routine, unlike that in prisons, gives them few pointers. Nothing much happens in detention, other than the passage of time. People wait (Turnbull, 2016). With little clarity over what is going on and what might yet come to pass, detainees experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2015). They find it hard to trust one another or the staff employed to secure and assist them (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2016). Custodial employees too, wonder about their work, its status, impact, and legitimacy (Bosworth, 2013; Bosworth and Slade, 2014).

In this article, we explore the methodological impact of such uncertainty. Drawing on a range of fieldwork, we discuss what it is like to conduct interviews with anxious populations, consider the limits of what applied research may achieve and explore some of the risks to participants and researchers. Following traditions in prison research, where discussions of methodology have revealed important theoretical and ethical insights (Bosworth et al., 2005; Drake et al., 2015; Liebling, 1999), we believe a reflexive methodological account may assist in understanding and, potentially, challenging immigration detention. Attention to the research process also allows us to reflect on the role of academic scholarship in this area of public policy. Criminologists have an important opportunity to contribute critical, empirically informed scholarship to this debate as the emerging field of border criminology demonstrates (see, for example, Aliverti, 2013; Aas and Bosworth, 2013, Pickering and Ham, 2014; Weber, 2013). Yet, risks remain.

## **Understanding Immigration Detention: Context and Methodology**

Although the British government has long had the power to detain foreign national citizens, immigration detention is a relatively new practice. Purpose-built custodial centres have existed since the Harmondsworth Detention Unit opened near London's Heathrow airport in 1970. Yet, the contemporary system sprang up under New Labour, following the passage of laws restricting immigration and asylum that expanded the categories under which foreigners could be detained (Bosworth and Guild, 2008; Wilsher, 2011). Until then, for the most part, the British government used prisons for asylum seekers or those awaiting deportation or removal (Bosworth, 2014).

These days, while overall numbers remain small relative to the total who could be held, the system has become entrenched. Primarily filled with young men, IRCs hold people from all corners of the globe, some of whom have lived and worked in Britain for many years, others of whom have only just arrived. Most speak some English, yet many find it very difficult to communicate with ease.

There is no sole provider of immigration custody in Britain. Instead, each centre is contracted out by the Home Office to a custodial company or to HM Prison Service. The daily regime must meet certain thresholds set by the Home Office (UKBA, 2008), but is otherwise open to the centre manager to determine. Immigration officers are situated onsite to gather and deliver paperwork. Decisions about removal dates, deportation or release are made offsite by immigration caseworkers. Detainees can apply for bail or judicial review, to have their case heard before a court or tribunal. The conditions allowing for such judicial overview are increasingly restricted (Costello, 2015; O'Nions, 2008).

Our study, of everyday life in immigration detention, was the first of its kind.<sup>2</sup> One earlier project, by political scientist Alexandra Hall (2010, 2012), which explored staff perspectives, was published during our fieldwork period. Four years since our initial project ended, little has changed. The government remains reluctant to open these institutions to academic scrutiny. While Mary continues in her fieldwork, and Blerina joins her on occasion, we continue to be the exception to the norm.

This article primarily draws on material we gathered over an 18-month period from 2009–2011, when together and separately, we visited five detention centres, spending

around three days per week in each institution for up to six months at a time. During this period we formally interviewed over 200 detainees and 60 staff members, speaking to many others over the course of the ethnography. Reflecting the exploratory nature of the project, we used a range of methods including structured and unstructured interviews, life stories, focus groups, questionnaires and participant observation as we sought both to increase understanding of the complexity of the experience of detention and identify which techniques were most effective for data collection. So, too, we included as varied and representative a group of detainees and staff as possible. Full details of the methodology have been published elsewhere (Bosworth, 2014) and are outlined briefly below.

Initial contact with staff and detainees usually took place in activity rooms or in the library, although could occur as we were walking around the centres. As we became more familiar with the people and the layout of the institutions, we conducted research in association rooms, outdoor areas, the legal corridor and, at IRC Yarl's Wood, in the women's bedrooms. We never entered the bedrooms of detained men for fear that our actions would be considered inappropriately intimate by them, other detainees, or by the staff.<sup>3</sup> All our interactions occurred either in public spaces like the library and dining hall, or in interview rooms on the legal corridor.

As detainees became familiar with us, some introduced us to their friends and acquaintances, assisting us to recruit participants. Such people occasionally served as interpreters. Women and men would also approach us directly, having heard about the project from friends or acquaintances in the centre. Others merely wished to talk to an outsider, curious about our presence in these hidden and isolated sites.

Contact with staff was predominantly informal, based on conversations and observations. To supplement this material, usually at the end of our time in each centre, we formally interviewed at least 10 officers from a range of grades. For this part of the project we used a structured set of questions which had first to be authorized by the centre management.<sup>4</sup> Research with staff generated distinct methodological and ethical challenges and is discussed in detail in another publication (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2016).

Both of us were experienced field researchers, however, neither had spent any time in detention centres prior to this study.<sup>5</sup> The initial project proceeded in two stages, with Blerina joining Mary after she had already been conducting research for nine months, interviewing and observing in three of the centres: IRC Campsfield House; IRCs Colnbrook; and IRC Yarl's Wood. During this time Mary had piloted a survey on 'the quality of life in detention' (MQLD), modelled on Alison Liebling's (2004) Measure of the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL), which Blerina then assisted in developing and administering (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2013). Since then, Mary has remained in the field, where Blerina joins her on occasion.

While each of us spent some time before commencing fieldwork and as it was underway, reading about other researchers' experiences, legal developments, immigration policy and reports from relevant NGOs and government agencies, this literature only partly prepared us for the volatility and emotional pressures of the detention environment (see, for example, Gill, 2009; Hall, 2010; Phelps, 2009). Whereas we had expected life in detention to be shaped by institutional matters, like prisons, it became apparent during fieldwork that while detainees were conscious of everyday aspects of the detention regime, they were far more profoundly concerned about matters further

afield. Their experiences of confinement were defined by a host of factors outside the establishment including, but not limited to, their migration history, their cultural, religious, educational and political backgrounds, their knowledge of British culture and language (including how long they had been resident in the UK), their perception of legal systems in democratic countries, familial support, relationships outside the centres, contact with outside organizations and so on. Above all, their view of detention hinged on their immigration case.

Under these circumstances, some knowledge of migration policies, cultural diversity, religion and basic geography, was essential for understanding what was going on around us. Demonstrating expertise on such matters was also important for perceptions of our competency and to our ability to build relationships of trust. Our views were often sought out as staff and detainees were curious about our opinions of detention, its justification and effects. Was it fair, they wanted to know; what did we think of daily life in these institutions? In such conversations, participants grasped at matters of legitimacy, wondering about the purpose of these places, why they were working or held within them (Bosworth, 2013).

Although we remained institutionally independent in the choice of research topic, data analysis, interpretation and dissemination we were (and indeed, continue to be) dependent on the Home Office and the custodial firms for research access (for more on this see Bosworth and Kellezi, 2016). Given our unique permission to study IRCs, we felt a complex and manifold sense of responsibility to make an impact. Yet, it was not always clear where our efforts should be targeted.

Most obviously, we felt considerable responsibility towards the detainees. Safeguarding their well-being was a key reason for the research and a significant ethical challenge. All we could offer was a sympathetic ear, and the opportunity to participate in published research. We could not assist them with what preoccupied them the most: their immigration case. For that, they needed a lawyer.

We also were conscious of obligations towards the Home Office and their onsite staff, as well as to the centre management and the custodial staff, many of whom offered us crucial support in the process of gaining and maintaining permission to enter. Some had quite unrealistic aspirations for our study. 'If we had proper information about problems', one senior staff member at IRC Campsfield House earnestly told Mary, 'we could fix them' (IRC Campsfield House; see also Bosworth, 2014). Others were less interested, happy just to have extra people around who would keep some detainees occupied.

More distantly, we were aware of the needs of our participants' families and friends whose lives were adversely affected by their confinement. Finally, we also interacted with other organizations working with these groups. Could our research assist any of these people, we wondered? What if, however inadvertently, it made matters worse?

Attempting to meet the expectations of these various groups felt overwhelming. Academic research is slow, meticulous and, usually, somewhat removed from the immediate problems facing participants. It also tries to take a wide view, including a range of perspectives. With so many detainees so desperate, the limitations of scholarship appeared (appear) difficult to justify. The solution, to respect individuals and institutional practices, acknowledging people's suffering and the pains of confinement while maintaining a good working relationship with staff, allowed us to include

and investigate as many perspectives as we could, to deepen our understanding. Yet, it came at a cost, as our welcoming attitude to all participants and our good working relationship with staff was considered by some, within the centre and outside, as evidence of an alliance with the Home Office and centre management. Our association with the discipline of criminology did not help: 'Why criminology?' many women and men angrily demanded. 'We are not criminals!' As we will describe in more detail below, remaining open to all participants was also emotionally taxing, as we frequently had to disguise our views about the centres and the stories we were being told from those around us.

### **Building Trust and Managing Expectations under Conditions of Uncertainty**

The uncertainty that characterizes IRCs had a profound impact on our methodology and our experience of the fieldwork. As we soon discovered, some of our most basic assumptions, starting with our emphasis on narrative, needed adjustment.

IRCs are saturated in stories. Yet, detainees are temporally uncertain. The conclusion of their narrative has not yet been written. Although officially just a final stop on the way to the airport, IRCs are, in reality, sites where people strive to change the outcome of their immigration case by building an alternative account of their lives and their future. If they can just make someone believe them, they may be allowed to stay. The asylum process, in particular, relies heavily on narrative, since few applicants possess legal documents necessary to prove their case (Cowan et al., 2014). Those who have worked without a visa, or in violation of their original immigration status, find their version of events outweighed by legal requirements (Costello, 2015).

Under these circumstances, which are always compounded by language barriers, 'stories' are no longer a source of relief or easily shared as they might be in a prison setting (Farrant, 2014). They are jealously guarded, endlessly repeated, curated forms of evidence. Administering another set of questions to people whose life was already under interrogation, was hard to do. Above all, asking for too much detail could make women and men feel as though they were undergoing another Home Office interview. For these reasons, we favoured unstructured interviews and did not attempt any purposeful sampling.

Many were deeply cynical about how the immigration system worked. Their concerns often hinged on narrative:

Someone come and tell lies, they quickly accept. But true people, true problem – they are not going to accept. My life ... three years. I'm waiting, waiting, waiting, maybe next time they will believe me, next time they will believe me. I day and daily and daily, but they are now no give to me chance to go High Court, they are going to send me back. (Ayesha, Pakistan, IRC Yarl's Wood)

Such experiences and the cynicism they evinced, inevitably affected how detainees viewed research. What, after all all, could we do for them if the government would not accept their case?

Many simply found the uncertainty hanging over them overwhelming. ‘There is nothing I can do’, Nimali said tearfully,

I can’t go back. I have nowhere to go. I have wasted my life. I can do nothing. My family would never have me back. My mother died and they don’t answer my phone calls. They don’t want to talk to me. (Sri Lanka, IRC Yarl’s Wood)

Inviting participants to interview under these conditions posed significant ethical challenges, since the potential benefits (to us) of hearing their stories had to be balanced carefully against the potential harm (to them) of remembering and sharing painful or distressing experiences (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kellezi and Reicher, 2014; Pennebaker, 2000). All we could do was to be vigilant towards any potential signs of distress and wait for those who seemed to be struggling to approach us. We also tried to identify individual staff and sources of support within the centre that we could refer detainees to that needed support. Such options were limited.

It rapidly became clear that detainees and staff were largely unfamiliar with academic research. On the one hand, this meant that some people spoke more freely and openly than we had anticipated. Unlike prisons, for instance, where scholars sometimes struggle to split their time evenly among staff and prisoners due to institutional hostilities and concerns about researcher partiality, we were able to move freely between the two groups. Detainees seemed to accept we would speak to staff while officers usually encouraged us to converse with detainees, anxious to facilitate engagement with them to try to improve their situation (on prisons, see, *inter alia*, Carrabine and Longhurst, 1998; Crewe, 2009; Philips, 2010; Ugelvik, 2014).

At the same time, however, staff and detainees were often apprehensive about the potential impact of the research on their career or their migration case. As a result, with detainees, in particular, we had to provide continuous assurance that their participation was voluntary, confidential and anonymous. Very few agreed to sign a written informed consent sheet, insisting on verbal consent. Some refused to provide their nationality. We were not always able, or sought, to record their first name.

Such matters conflicted with the expectations of our institutional review process. They also had implications for our sample size and analysis. In those sites where we were present together, we could not always rely on our fieldnotes to differentiate between participants if we had not recorded names or nationalities. Instead, we had to regularly confer and check with one another.

Despite the length of time we spent in many of the institutions, much of the material we gathered was fragmented. Some detainees raised concerns or stopped participating, part-way through an interview. Others disclosed new information about themselves, which contradicted their earlier accounts after they had spoken to us a number of times. We did not acknowledge or comment on these contradictions. Others sought reassurance that they could retrospectively withdraw from the project if they changed their mind at a later date.

On occasion we realized that people within and beyond the institutions were warning against participation. It was not just detainees who had misgivings about us, in other words, but their lawyers and family members were also suspicious. Consequently, some

chose to delay, agreeing to join in, but putting us off until an aspect of their legal case had been concluded. 'I have a hearing next week', Enal explained apologetically one day to Blerina,

I will complete your questionnaire after my hearing. You know your job is very hard because the women don't trust you. They don't know who you are or if they should trust you. They are really scared so they don't like talking to anyone. [...] I will complete your questionnaire after the hearing next week. (Jamaica, IRC Yarl's Wood)

Mistrust could also spring from experiences long ago. Those who had endured violence in their countries of origin were often particularly suspicious of figures of authority and struggled to trust us. Many wanted to speak, but were unsure of the consequences. Gena tried to explain:

what information I heard which is passing around saying that, you know, you can't trust people coming from research or university from Oxford because a few of them have told me that they have been told not to discuss anything much because they are putting their own risk, they're putting their life at risk. (India, IRC Yarl's Wood)

Our nationality was another unexpected source of confusion. The fact that neither of us held British citizenship at the time, led numerous staff to teasingly threaten to detain us. Detainees were rather less jocular. They were sometimes envious and often curious about why and how our experiences of migration had been so straightforward. Rather than a point of commonality, in other words, our status as migrants was yet another grounds for mistrust. Matters took the most extreme form in Yarl's Wood, when a story circulated, Pam told us, that one of us was there to 'learn how to open an immigration centre in Australia' (Nigeria, IRC Yarl's Wood). At a time when Serco had recently won the contract to run all the mainland centres, the sudden presence of an Australian 'researcher' (Mary) was considered suspicious.

On occasion individuals challenged us directly about our views and intentions. Staff, most predictably, wanted to know what we thought about detention. Did we support it or did we side with those activists who seek to close the centres down? Detainees in all centres accused us of working for the government. 'Why are you here?' Perry asked Mary. 'Maybe you're from UKBA and everything I tell you, you will go and tell them... Why should I talk to you?' (Uganda, IRC Brook House). As Blerina waited for a staff member to unlock her from the housing unit, a detainee told her she looked like a police officer. Moving a few feet away this woman then announced to others in a raised voice: 'She works undercover for the Home Office. She is with the police' (Flo, Jamaica, IRC Yarl's Wood).

Many, who were already anxious and frustrated, struggled to understand what academic research could accomplish. 'Don't talk to her', Deb yelled angrily at another woman quietly conferring with Mary, 'she does nothing for us. All she does is take our stories!' (Nigeria, IRC Yarl's Wood). Tamara took a similar view. Introduced to us by her friend who recommended our project, she refused to participate. 'Is there anything in it for me? Will it get me out of here?' she wanted to know. 'Why should I participate if



there is nothing in it for me?’ (Jamaica, IRC Yarl’s Wood). Elsewhere, in IRC Tinsley House, a group of young men from Afghanistan were even more cynical. ‘There are no laws in England’, one of them stated. ‘There are so many injustices. What is the point of talking? Nothing will change’ (Takim, Afghanistan, IRC Tinsley House).

Given that we knew that our research was unlikely to assist any individual in our study directly, these views were difficult to counter. As such, they raise(d) uncomfortable questions about the purpose and impact of research. While universities and funding councils spend ever more time urging us to craft impact statements and conduct knowledge exchange, it may be time to consider what our scholarship cannot do and what it cannot achieve (Bosworth et al., 2005).

Staff and detainees often simply did not understand the nature or limitations of our role. They thought we might be lawyers. They hoped we were journalists. Mary’s plan to ‘write a book’, met with some comprehension, although immediately generated quite reasonable demands: ‘Who will read it?’, people in each centre wanted to know. ‘Will it get picked up by the media?’ Asa asked hopefully (Uganda, IRC Tinsley House). Even those with whom we built close relationships, spending hours in informal conversation and activity, sometimes remained confused. ‘What is your role in here?’ Pam asked one day, after many months had passed. ‘When you came I thought you will help us, by writing to the media and publicize what they are doing to us in here. I thought you were going to write about this’ (Nigeria, IRC Yarl’s Wood).

Such questions did not prevent people from participating. Nor did they mean that nobody benefited from joining in. Despite her uncertainty about our role, for instance, Pam encouraged many of those around her to speak to us, and updated us on events in the centre when we had been absent for a few days. In this, she was motivated neither by our academic credentials nor by our aspirations for reform, but by her sense that we had acknowledged her as a person. ‘Thank you for talking to us’, she said near the end of her time in Yarl’s Wood:

Thank you for asking how you are. No one asks us how we are. But you do. You come in and you ask how we are. Thank you for caring, for making us feel wanted. By coming and talking to you make us feel that someone wants us. (Pam, Nigeria, IRC Yarl’s Wood)

## **Ethics and Emotions in an Uncertain Environment**

Despite our previous research experiences in sensitive contexts, we were unprepared for the complexity of IRCs, the pains we would witness or the emotional and practical demands of doing research in such mistrustful and troubling environments. It quickly became apparent that detention was deeply distressing in ways we had not foreseen and that we had to learn to recognize signs of potential harm to participants. Yet when we turned to ethical guidelines they were of little use (see also Irwin, 2006; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Parker, 2007). The usual safeguards, like informed consent, were hard to rely upon in an environment characterized by confusion and trauma. A commitment to safeguarding participants likewise felt hollow under conditions of forced return.

As is standard practice, we came armed with information sheets about institutional and external assistance. In detention, however, there is very little help available. For

example, while detainees have access to healthcare, its quality is roundly condemned. So, too, there is ample evidence that detention itself causes mental distress (Cleveland and Rousseau, 2013; Mares and Jureidini, 2004; Robjant et al., 2009; Shaw, 2016). Under these circumstances, our commitment to not harming participants and to recognize distress were often the only protections we could muster (Miller and Boulton, 2007; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007).

Qualitative fieldwork cannot place the same emphasis on standard procedures and protocol for safeguarding researchers and participants as quantitative studies. This is partly because such protocols are difficult to implement when there is no pre-established procedure of recruiting research participation. Matters are exacerbated where there are no existing services that the participants are willing to engage with. In the years following this study a counselling service was developed in some IRCs, but at the time of this study such resources were very limited. In any case, the distress that we witnessed often sprang from the immigration system, and, as such, would have been best addressed by a lawyer rather than by a health professional.

While the participants were our primary concern, we also had to monitor the effect of the fieldwork on ourselves. Here, too, ethical guidelines did not provide clear advice on when to pause our research or when our own emotional distress would interfere with ethical and safe decisions in the field (Liebling, 2014; Sloan and Drake, 2013).

Emotional engagement could be taxing. Our fieldnotes are full of anxiety and fatigue. 'Feeling a bit sick today – worn out and nauseas.' (Fieldnotes, March 2010, IRC Colnbrook). 'I had to leave after lunch. Couldn't take any more.' (Fieldnotes, July, 2010, IRC Yarl's Wood). Sometimes we were unable to hide our feelings. In IRC Colnbrook, for instance, Mary cried during an interview with Aziz, whose daughter had been placed in foster care. Blerina wept when hearing Iola's story about how her family were ignoring her cancer worries because they were preoccupied with detention. It was hard not to cry when Farzad, from Afghanistan, confessed he no longer contacted his wife and children because, having failed to provide for them financially, he felt he had no right to them anymore. Specific events like self-harm or deportation are very difficult to observe or hear about.

Our responses to the suffering of others did not go unnoticed. 'This place sucks the energy out of your life. Even you', Basem warned. 'Look at you! You are tired all the time and you look like you are going to sleep at any moment' (Algeria, IRC Tinsley House). While some, like Pam, felt validated when they could see that we were affected by their stories, as it was seen as evidence of our engagement, others like Aziz were put off. Noticing the tears gathering in Mary's eyes, he drew his story abruptly to a close, uncomfortable at her emotional response.

Such experiences will be familiar to criminologists in other fields. Our discipline as a whole regularly confronts sorrow and harm. Prisons scholars have published extensively on how to represent such matters and the risk that they may undermine the claims we make (Farrant, 2014; Jewkes, 2012; Wakeman, 2014). Others offer practical guidance in managing such matters, recommending regular discussion with colleagues. 'It is almost always better to reflect with others' Alison Liebling (2014: 483–484) notes,

for it is not always possible to ‘know thyself’ fully, at the time, or even many years later. We may all need to revalidate our humanity during a period of intense data collection [...] and this is rarely accomplished alone.

Elsewhere, therapists working with traumatized population document the personal costs of their work (see Baird and Kracen, 2006) and the benefit of regular supervision towards for example vicarious traumatization (Dickes, 1998). While there is no systematic evidence on the impact of working with traumatized populations among criminologists, our team meetings, which we decided to audio record from early on, often became reflections on the impact the research was having on us as researchers. Such meetings should perhaps become part of study protocols especially when conducting long periods of fieldwork alone.

The scale of suffering we witnessed and its impact on us became an important part of the data we collected.<sup>6</sup> As Jewkes (2012) notes on prison research, the suffering of detainees and our emotional response to them clarified the exclusionary nature of IRCs. The scale of distress we witnessed engaged us in other ways as well. We became more proactive in trying to identify sources of help and potential information for detainees. We paid attention to potential signs of distress and waited for participants to approach us. We also became interested in resilience factors, sources of support and coping mechanisms.

In the long term, our emotions, however painful, were both personally and intellectually inspirational. Demands by individuals like Asa, spurred us on. ‘You need to make sure you publish my story’, he told us sternly before he was deported (Uganda, IRC Tinsley House). In the short term, however, the pain we witnessed was disabling. As we got to know individuals over weeks and even months, we shared some of their worries about important decisions like removal or court hearings. We could not stop thinking about what they were going through even outside of fieldwork. We avoided reading transcripts and writing up the data for some time after the end of fieldwork.

Looking at the project now, with the benefits of the passage of time, it is clear that the emotional costs of fieldwork illuminate a key aspect of these sites of confinement. These places are designed to expel and hurt. When considered in this light, many of the difficulties we faced in gaining trust, and in making sense of what we saw become connected. Just as the uncertainty of the immigration system and its inconsistent application shapes IRCs and flows from them, so too, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these sites contribute to and are shaped by pain. Unlike the more familiar pains of imprisonment, which inhere in the purpose of a custodial sentence, however, those of detention are caused by the threat of expulsion and the designation of groups and individuals as unwanted and unwelcome. Transforming human beings into bodies that can be expelled is not just a legal but also a symbolic and affective endeavour. Denial and rejection, inherently, are painful to endure and to witness (Ahmed, 2000; Bosworth, 2014; Cohen, 2001).

## Conclusion

Criminologists have identified a number of theoretical and methodological challenges of doing research in prisons. Nearly 20 years ago, Alison Liebling (1999) singled out a

series of factors that included the original motivation for the project, competing relationships between funders, staff and prisoners, building trust, acknowledging participants as agents, establishing accuracy of data, dealing with prisoner distress and acknowledging the human suffering rising from imprisonment (see also Reiter, 2014; Rowe, 2014). More recently she has written about the importance of the individual researcher in generating data, arguing that in qualitative accounts, the researcher is the instrument (Liebling, 2010; see also Drake and Harvey, 2014).

All of these issues are amplified in IRCs by the structural isolation of the research environment, the heterogeneity of their population and their obscure legal framework (Costello, 2015). As a result, power relations in these sites between researchers, institutions and participants and among all three, are even more complex. As researchers we had to make decision about data collection and analysis while cognizant of detainee distress and mental health problems. Staff too were often stressed and overworked. Finally, the detainee population turns over frequently. While some remain stuck in detention, most are gone within 28 days or less. Developing consistent and trust-based research relationships under these conditions can feel impossible.

After trying a number of methodologies, we found ethnography the most appropriate means of addressing these complex, low trust environments. It was not only the most effective way of gathering information, but it also permitted us to adapt to change and to renegotiate access and participation (Allbutt and Masters, 2010; Bosworth, 2014; Drake and Harvey, 2014; Earle, 2014; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Sustained periods in the field allow us to participate in the everyday lives of these institutions and the individuals and acquire deep knowledge of institutional practices.

Nonetheless, ethnographic research is not without its problems. Long periods of free-ranging research are hard to explain to private companies or to the Home Office in requests for research access and in reporting findings. Although spending extended periods of unstructured time with participants is meant to generate trust, in detention, the population shifts so rapidly that there is no guarantee of continuity. So, too, there are significant language barriers and cultural and religious differences. As a result, the 'thick description' of a traditional ethnography eluded us (Geertz, 1972). Instead, we gathered fragments, pieces of stories, versions of events, disputed accounts. Just as we were not untouched by the emotional distress of these sites, our data mirrored their uncertainty.

Seven years on from the first days in Campsfield House, we remain in the field, gathering information and testimonies, observing, and administering questionnaires. We continue to work within a framework that prioritizes detainee well-being while engaging with policy makers. The original sites of research are changing, under new management, inhabited by different people. Notwithstanding the high economic and social costs of these institutions, the British government remains as committed to them as ever. Under these circumstances the need for independent academic inquiry is as urgent as it ever was while the task to reduce harm and to increase understanding remains.

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## Notes

1. Up to 500 more can be found in prison, and around 100 in short-term holding facilities at ports and airports. This article only covers research in IRCs.
2. For detailed findings, see Bosworth (2012, 2013, 2014); Bosworth and Kellezi (2013, 2014); and Bosworth and Slade (2014).
3. Gavin Slade, who conducted research for Mary in IRC Morton Hall, in contrast, was able to interview the men in their bedrooms. Testimonies from this project can be found in Bosworth and Slade (2014).
4. IRC Campsfield House was an exception. Here, Mary conducted open-ended interviews with staff before she commenced the fieldwork, meeting with a large number of officers, often in pairs. Officers were ordered to attend the interviews by the Centre Manager.
5. Our previous experience included research in prisons (Bosworth, 1999), a post-war context and refugee camps (Kellezi, 2006).
6. Such matters also affect custodial officers, who go to great lengths to minimize their acknowledgement of the suffering they witness, unable to absorb it all. As with the legal professionals studied by Cowan et al. (2013), their approaches while understandable, were not always sympathetic. For more see Bosworth (2014).

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