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Ethnography in Contexts of Incarceration: Exploring potentials and limits*

Catarina Frois **
Carmen Osuna***
Antónia Pedroso de Lima****

Abstract

This article compares two ethnographic studies in a penitentiary context – a male prison in Portugal and a female prison in Spain. Two perspectives are used: 1) a methodological dimension: to be a woman anthropologist influences the conduct of the empiric investigation in female and male prisons, conditions access to the terrain, observation of daily prison life and the relations constructed with interlocutors; 2) an analytical dimension: gender relations are central to perceiving the dynamics constructed between the inmate population in their processes of daily conviviality and establishment of hierarchies, but they must be integrated in the relations of class and gender in which they are inserted. Thus, we defend an intersectional perspective to understand the relational dynamics between the different subjects in the prison – guards, administrators, workers, inmates – and between them and the researchers. In conclusion, we reflect on subjectivity and reflexivity in field work that has particular demands in how we manage emotions, distance and proximity.

Keywords: Ethnography, prison, gender, subjectivity.

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** Professor of Departament of Anthropology ISCTE-IUL; Researcher of Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA), Lisboa, Portugal. catarina.frois@iscte-iul.pt / https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7702-8456
*** Professor of Departament of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Madrid, Espanha. cosuna@fsof.uned.es / https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9617-9193
**** Professor of Departament of Anthropology ISCTE-IUL; Researcher of Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA), Lisboa, Portugal. Portugal. antonia.lima@iscte-iul.pt / https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1536-1226
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What challenges appear in qualitative investigations in contexts of incarceration? What implications do the rules, procedures and institutional and institutionalized asymmetries have on ethnographic process (and what are they)? In what way do the specificities inherent to the gender, age and race of researchers influence, determine or come to have an impact on the way that research is conducted? In sum, recognizing and identifying the paradoxes and oxymorons that have defined prison institutions since their origin and conception (because it would be mistaken to think they are recent characteristics), what does anthropology learn in methodological, ethical and deontological terms from research in prison contexts?

This is a recognizedly exploratory article that seeks to identify questions, and express analytical proposals by beginning with a comparison of two ethnographies conducted in two European countries. Catarina Frois worked at a prison in Linhó, Portugal, and Carmen Osuna at a prison in Spain – and at different kinds prison facilities – a male prison and a female prison. The lack of experience of the first investigator in a prison context had impacts in emotional, personal and even professional terms. In a certain sense, the months of fieldwork required the researchers to exercise their various personas and forced them to confront their vulnerabilities as persons, anthropologists, women, companions, professors and daughters. Discussions with Antónia Lima about these multiple questions led to the invitation to write this text together.[1]

We did so using perspectives that addresses the central themes of this dossier, that is: 1) a methodological dimension – to be a woman anthropologist influences the conduct of the empiric investigation (in both female and male prisons) conditions access to the terrain and the observation of daily prison life, and

[1] Parts of this article are from the research projects "Care as sustainability in crisis situations". FCT PTDC/CS-ANT/117259/2010, "Negotiating Livelihoods under transformative politics: crisis, policies and practices in Portugal 2008-2018", FCT PTDC/SOC-ANT/32676/2017, and CRIA UID/ANT/04038/2019.

modulates the relations that are established and constructed with the various interlocutors. We combined this reflection with 2) an analytical dimension – gender relations are central to perceiving the dynamics constructed between the imprisoned population with the researcher, or within the imprisoned population itself, in particular in processes of daily conviviality and the (pre)established hierarchies. To analyze the dynamic relations inherent to prisons, and between the imprisoned population and researchers, we assumed an intersectional perspective and discuss the ethical, moral and deontological questions that are raised in the unique contexts of prisons, seeking to reveal how different particularities are articulated and mobilized.

Prison? Prisons?

Although there is an abundance of scholarly work focused on spaces of detention or prison establishments with a rich interdisciplinary variety, we believe it is important to briefly comment on some limitations that this knowledge has come to produce and reproduce. This broad field of scientific production shows that there is no such thing as *the prison*, but various places denominated as such.[2] Prison institutions, well described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, have differentiated proposals, purposes, and *existences* throughout the world, in each country and within each country. Their modus operandi is directly dependent and conditioned by outside elements: the political and ideological orientation of the country – which is reflected, for example, in the definition of what is a crime and in how it should be punished, the religious, cultural and moral traditions; the socio-economic conditions and their connection with, for example, the

[2] See, for example, the collections dedicated to these issues from international publishers such as Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan or Oxford University Press, including the: *Handbook on Prisons* (Jewkes; Crewe; Bennett, 2016), Routledge; *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography* (Drake; Earle; Sloan, 2015); *The Oxford Handbook of Prisons and Imprisonment* (Wooldredge; Smith, 2018).

level of development and the observance or recognition of what are (human) "rights".

With these considerations, it is imperative to call attention to how some ideas about "prisons" have been reified and considered hegemonic, without questioning – or perhaps by relegating to a secondary plane – to what point are these readings and interpretations valid in other geographic contexts? We do not intend to discuss the quality or pertinence of these observations, but to call attention to nuances that cannot be ignored. It would not be an exaggeration to affirm that the Anglo-Saxon literature dominated the debate for decades: the United States of America is a reference because of its extreme situations of incarceration, while the United Kingdom has extensive production in the field of criminology and criminal justice, benefitting directly from government financing, in a close articulation between the academy and political decision makers (e.g. Bosworth; Hoyle; Zedner, 2016; Zedner; Hoyle; Bosworth, 2016). Therefore, what is seen, is that certain paradigms had and continue to have a deep impact on how analysis is conducted in other places in the world, transplanting models of thinking and theories about prisons, incarceration and criminal justice.

Consider, for example, the idea of "prison complex" used by Angela Davis (2003), Loic Wacquant (2001), Ruth Gilmore (who also uses the expression "golden gulag", 2007), and other authors. In brief, the idea of a prison complex describes an entire series of devices, structures and infrastructures created around the prison establishment, in a closed mechanism that is self-nourishing and perpetuating: in terms of employment for the resident population at a certain location, from the labor and benefits that are obtained (the abolition of slave labor in the US does not contemplate prisoners, who are in practice workers without labor rights), and in the requalification and valorization of the land where prisons are built. This form of organization and management of the penitentiary system is very particular to the North American context, culture and political history, with all of the idiosyncrasies that characterize them. In Europe, the situation is precisely the

contrary. We are unlikely to find a European country – in particular those in which the welfare-state performs a dominant role – where the prison system is managed by the private sector. In Scandinavian countries, for example, prisons are considered state institutions equivalent to schools or hospitals. That is to say that the model applied (which we will not discuss here, given that it has been widely analyzed) follows the same premises in terms of support, care and benefits, both for those who are at liberty and those who are jailed.[3] There is no parallel between a high security prison in Norway and its equivalent in the United States, whether in terms of physical space, administration of daily life, and the interaction between guards and incarcerated subjects. There are also no equivalents to the situation of overcrowding and administration of daily prison life when we observe in the cases of prisons dominated by groups such as the PCC in Brazil, or the overcrowding in Portuguese or Spanish prisons (Frois, 2017; Biondi; 2018; Padovani; 2018). It is not only a question of proportionality and ratio, but the premises of the meaning of *privation of liberty*, the connection of the subject with the state, and the role of the state and the action of its penitentiary and judicial apparatus (e.g. Ruggiero; Ryan, 2013; Sarat, 2014).

Similarly, the type of population diversity found in a North American, Brazilian, Norwegian, Spanish or Portuguese prison is profoundly different. While in the US and Brazil racial and class markers are strongly present in prison establishments, which can even be thought of as mirrors of racial discrimination, in particular between whites and blacks, South Americans, and Latins, in Europe, this is not as frequent. Actually, for two decades, in Europe, the more significant differentiations were defined in ethnic and national terms. In some European countries, such as Portugal

[3] The literature is extensive and follows various approaches. See, for example, the recente study by Vanessa Barker (2019), the collection organized by Scharff Smith and Ugelvik (2017), Ugelvik and Dullum (2012) or the comparison conducted by Pratt and Eriksson (2013) about what they describe as "Anglophone excess" and "Nordic exceptionalism" about the penetentiary systems and models.

and Spain, the law does not allow registering classifications of this order. For this reason, formally, legally and institutionally there is no accounting for and description in quantitative terms of the prison population from the perspective of their racial or ethnic composition. These different forms of constructing the statistical data in each country produce differentiated forms of constructing perceptions about prisons in each one of these contexts. The idea that prison populations are "black" in Brazil and the United States, contrasts with the idea in Europe that prisons are for the poor and immigrants. If until a few decades ago the black population was numerically not significant on the European continent, and if now it is not registered, this means that the significant transformation of Europe in racial terms goes unseen. The fact that there is no data about racial differences does not mean that they do not exist and that they do not have important consequences on the forms of construction of relations and asymmetries within the prisons of these countries, but contributes, to not revealing the racialization of social relations, which is becoming an unavoidable question in the current political and ideological debate. Thus, not only should the categories of racialization be qualified, but they must also be considered in context, to identify which make sense and where. It is clear that the racial differences are not limited to "white" and "black" and that these categories must be qualified (as does Padovani, 2017) to encompass other markers of social differentiation that are conjugated with them, such as gender, class, ethnic and religious categories. The analytical intersection between these various dimensions is what allows us to go beyond the discourses that have become consensual even if, in our opinion, acritical.

Male prison establishment – Portugal

> The prison at Linhó has a particular characteristic: they [the inmates] are very young men who were sentenced to very long terms. Most of them are between 18 and 21 and are sentenced to more than six years in jail. About 9, 10, 11 years. Theft, robbery, more or less this. I think there won't

> be problems, they are very accessible and like to speak. Of course, we cannot forget that they are criminals; they are here because they committed crimes, if not, they would not be here, they would be on the outside (Director of the Prison Establishment of do Linhó, July 2013).

When, in July 2013, she was authorized to conduct interviews and accompany daily life in male and female prison establishments in Portugal, Frois began what would come to be a deeper research project about the Portuguese penitentiary context. This was her first research experience with incarceration, after various years studying themes related to public security, policing, and criminality (Frois, 2011; 2013; Maguire; Frois; Zurawski, 2014). The objective was to observe the functioning of prison-institutions, accompanying daily life in prison, speaking with detained men and women, employees, guards and other professionals found in the daily life of the institution.

Linhó, a prison with 500 men located in the periphery of Lisbon, the Portuguese capital, has a composition that can be considered atypical, given that of the 49 Portuguese prisons, few have such a large proportion of young adults condemned for violent and serious crimes, with prison sentences longer than 7 years. Byeond this specificity (which corresponds to the explicit purpose of the prison since its creation in the late 1950s), most of its inhabitants are from peripheral neighborhoods (about the use of this concept see the discussion of Padovani, 2018). The relations within the prison largely reproduce the dynamics of interaction that are found outside it, either between groups from Neighborhood X, and Neighborhood Y, or among the "Portuguese", "Africans" (recognizing that most of the "Africans" are also Portuguese), and Brazilians, or more generically, those from the "East". The prison was an extension of the neighborhood and imported and resolved the questions and conflicts that took place on the outside (e.g. Cunha, 2002).

First, authorization was obtained to conduct interviews among 10 to 15 men with different prison histories – that is, primary and repeat offenders, those who have been to other

prisons or only this one, and convicted of various crimes. Secondly, interviews would be conducted with prison guards (men and women) and other prison staff. The selection of participants was made in conjunction with the director, a member of the technical services and the head of the prison guards. Each one commented on the potential interviewees based on a list of inmates: if the prisoner in question did or did not like to participate in academic studies, if he was housed in the active or inactive zone,[4] on what days they would receive visitors or would be working and, therefore, not available. Finally, Frois had a list of numbers, each corresponding to a man.

During the first week of research, the interviews took place in the space of the school, which was in a group of pre-fabricated buildings located in one of the prison wings. There were only two modules: one had a small library, where the inmates listened to music or played on a computer. The other module was divided into classrooms and a teachers' room that the researcher used.

The list of numbers revealed that, contrary to what she wanted, it was not the researcher who began the interaction with the inmates. In reality, once she reached the school, she did not know which inmate would be part of the selection. This took place with the inmates who were called by a guard and asked if they were available to "speak with the doctor". If so, they were sent to the room where the researcher was waiting. The artificiality that anticipated the interview contrasted profoundly with the ethnographic practice that we defend. The inmates agreed to speak with someone who they did not know, not knowing the purpose of the conversation, and not knowing that they could decide not to participate. Thus, nearly invariably, the first question raised was: "What did I do?". That question emphasized the asymmetry of power involved in the relations between the various

[4] In an initial research phase only "active" inmates wer interviewed, that is, those who attended educational or work activities because they were out of their cell for more time. At the time, this prison had another wing that held "inactive"prisoners, who were only out of their cells for two hours per day, because they did not have work activities.

persons of the location: the interaction was not between equals, of a person with a person. The interaction of the researcher with the inmates began with a convocation: the person fulfilling a sentence, "the inmate", was called to speak with someone – in this case a woman, a "doctor" – who could have been a social worker, psychologist, lawyer, or judge. Once the purpose of the conversation was explained, as well as the objective of the study and that his participation had to be voluntary, on that basis the conversation could begin. For most of the inmates, the fact that they could speak about themselves was an opportunity to break the monotony. They agreed to participate in the study and simultaneously said: "Sure, out there I wasn't doing anything".

One day, after lunch, Frois returned to the space where she had conducted interviews in the morning. The gates of the residential wings had not been opened and the library was still empty. The guard responsible for the space asked if she wanted "to call someone [a prisoner] to come talk. She did not think it was necessary, she had an opportunity to just be there, observe what goes on and perhaps begin to establish another way to begin the interactions with inmates. Then an inmate entered the library, and seemed to find the anthropologist's presence peculiar. Not finding a way to begin an "informal" conversation, the researcher asked if he wanted to play checkers. Although he was wary, he said yes, and they sat down to play. After a few minutes, a few men entered, and outside she heard someone say: "Except there is a girl there!". The room filled up with people. Since the table was against a window, a crowd also gathered on the outside.

The man with whom she was playing made an effort to express indifference to what was happening around him, although he appeared to confront a growing problem: since he was about to lose the game, the others began to tease and push him. "Gee, lose to a woman! Get away! I'm next!". By the way that he kept quiet and did not react, it was evident that he was a person in a fragile position. He did not enter the discussion confronting the others, and he did not smile with them in a sign of comradery. In a new game, this time faster, the inmate won. At that moment, Frois

quickly presented herself and proposed a formal interview that was soon accepted. They went together to another room and all those who were there also left and quickly lost interest. The man explained why he did not react. He had only been in the prison for a short time, convicted for drug trafficking. Since he was not Portuguese, and did not know the other men, and had no friends, he knew he was in a situation of inferiority. In case of a fight, he assumed that the strategy was to not respond, even if this was the opposite of what was expected of him; to react, fight to show he was a "man".

The episode also showed the impact of being a woman researcher in a men's prison, the importance of thinking of the prison context from the categories of gender (McCorkel, 2003; Newton, 1994; Cunha, 2007; 2010; Padovani, 2018), but, above all to always do so from an intersectional perspective. That man was having difficulties establishing equal relations with his peers, having had arrived shortly before and was an "outsider"(which symbolically placed him in a situation of inferiority); and the way that he should show that he deserved to be accepted would be through demonstrations of strength and virility. That moment of direct interaction with a woman (that was not a "doctor" it was "a girl") was the ideal moment to affirm himself as a man in the eyes of his companions. For that man, this was, therefore, an emblematic moment of constitution of relations of power both in relation to the Portuguese men and in his interaction with a woman in their presence.

For Frois, this episode made it clear that the interaction with her interlocutors had to be regulated and could not be improvised, and should take maximum advantage of the situations in which she could be only an observer, although these were more frequent when she was among guards and not among inmates. This was how the hundreds of hours of conversations with inmates, guards and technicians took place, as a norm, in rooms identical to that where the inmates met their lawyer, had hearings with sentencing judges, or in other cases, in spaces where they usually received weekly visits. They were spaces that belonged to no one, frontier

spaces between the daily lives of each one, spaces of relationships between people in evident asymmetrical relations of power, marked by the non-spontaneity of the interaction.

Later that day, Frois told one of the sub-chiefs of the prison guards about the incident, who reprimanded her. Being a woman was not something that could be ignored in her interactions with the inmates, particularly if she was alone: "It was a dangerous situation that could have ended badly. Do not forget where you are. If we are wary when we are alone with them, the doctor should be as well. This is a prison, it is not a school". This reaction shows that there were various factors at stake. First, people from outside the prison could not circulate without first being cautioned about issues of safety. In the situation described, various types of confrontations could have occurred: of the prisoners with the researcher, of the prisoners with each other, or of prisoners with the prison guard who was alone in a location with fifty inmates. If the administrative zones were easy to access, and where it was possible to circulate without constraint (although it seemed strange to the guard and to the technical staff that someone apparently "doing nothing" was there) permanence in the prison zone was conditioned and even barred. The scarcity of guards, on one hand, and the overcrowding of the space, on the other, were emphasized as being able to favor the escalation of situations of conflict that, in another form, could be avoided (Frois, 2016; 2017; to be published). The inmates, and above all young men, should not be exposed to situations that accentuated the effects of deprival of liberty.

In this case, when she heard "a girl is there" it is gathered that, at least for some of those men, the limitation or impossibility of heterosexual sexual contacts had an impact on their daily life, that which Sykes (1958) celebrated as "incarceration pains". But this episode does not just refer us to the sexualization of the significance of the situation. In reality, it involved power relations that mediate the interaction between that man and that woman. Contrary to the hegemonic symbolic hierarchy in Portugal that imply a symbolic superiority of the masculine in social interactions, here the woman, even a small one, not only had more power

within the institution, but she also won the direct fight with that man in a game of checkers. The potential sexualization of the interpretation of the interaction was made invisible by the reification of the relation of power inverse to the model experienced in the daily practices of that male prison. We saw therefore how these categories of social differentiation, and the hierarchies that they produce, are constituted in the multiple and complex intersections between gender, status, class and nationality. In a context where the symbolic references of the contents of the categories of gender are constructed in elements of hypermasculinities, the physical presence of a woman is expressed by a hypersexualization of the situation. Nevertheless, the "inmates" clearly recognize the asymmetry of power that separates them from the "doctor" and direct all their comments to her checker companion. He, thinking not only like a man, but as an outsider, who does not yet belong to the place, is symbolically placed in a relationship of diminishment in relation to the other inmates and, therefore, had to demonstrate his virility more than the others to affirm himself in the group and be respected by his peers. Nationality here is a powerful marker of differentiation as is gender or class, with which, in reality, it is interconnected. The guards, for their part, by invoking the potential dangers that the researcher faced, exposed the various layers of meaning that inform the categories of imprisoned man based on stereotyped gender attributes, danger and criminality. Considering that the danger did not appear to be real, the guard's interpretation demonstrates the symbolic contents of the social categories that edify the prison system.

For the prison guards, the outside stimuli are not restricted to sexual desire as this episode may indicate. They extend to all the actions and events that could exacerbate the sense of privation, giving origin to frustration, envy, anger, and anguish. These feelings of devalorization of a person are, within the prison, important elements for constituting relations of power, domination and subordination. The diminishment of the inmates as free, autonomous and complete persons not only generates humility in

the inmates, but also legitimates the power of the guards. It is one way that the rules of the institution and the application of laws of the state inscribe in the bodies, minds and actions the hierarchization and power relations of the desired institutional order. Humiliation, frustration, envy, anger, and anguish, are thus tools of governmentality that are part of the emotional grammar that operationalizes the penal system and legitimates the asymmetries on which it is based and which it simultaneously reproduces (Coelho; Rezende, 2011). The emotions and behaviors of the various occupants of the prison space thus constitute an expression of the incorporation of the power relations between them and that guarantee the equilibrium of the system.

In reality, in our studies in male and female prison establishments it was not the sexual question that appeared to be more disturbing in the daily relationship, but more so another more prosaic aspect, the opportunity to leave the prison at the end of the day. That is, with both men and women inmates, what was sensed as a confrontation or even an afront, was the fact that, as investigators, we could enter and leave the prison, while they did not have this choice. The normality in which they inscribe their daily life became salient at the time when the paths separate. And once again the order of gender and power that mark life in prison and Portuguese society are inverted in that particular context.

Female prison establishment– Spain

The women's prison where the fieldwork was conducted by Osuna is located in Spain and has capacity for approximately 700 women in detention. Although it is located between two urban districts, access by public transportation is quite limited. This is one of the few Spanish prisons that houses only women and its architecture does not correspond to the so-called "center-type" – dominated by a large watchtower – but a model which in the understanding of the women incarcerated there is less oppressive.[5]

[5] This prison was constructed in the 1990s as a penetentiary center for youth. Since then all the new penetentiary centers correspooond to the "center type", so

It is divided in two areas denominated informally as *inside* and *outside*. While on the outside are found the offices of the prison employees, meeting rooms and visiting rooms, on the inside are the seven residential modules and the school space. The passages between the modules are surrounded by trees and rose bushes and each module has spaces for cells and common zones, like common rooms, cafeteria, workspaces, the steward's office and a patio. The study took place over 18 months and although the initial objective was related to paths that led to school abandonment and return to the educational system, priority was given to understanding the mechanisms of the prison operation (Osuna, 2019).

In the first days, what was most surprising in this place was its apparent normality. Osuna had never been to a prison establishment, which in her imagination corresponded to the stereotypes of violence and marginality, which are seen in the films and TV series. While the school director took her on a guided visit, and very pleasantly explained how the prison functions and where classes are given, the researcher observed the people with whom they crossed and thought: "This woman could be my mother, this tiny woman, could be me…".

The sole visual element that differentiates them was the identification card they wore on their chests and that certified authorization to enter the prison, and on which was found a photograph, name, the institution where she worked and the word "*investigadora*" [researcher]. In the winter months, when the temperature is cooler and this identification was often covered by coats or jackets, there were situations when both employees and women inmates mistook the researcher for someone who was serving a prison sentence. One of these moments of confusion among these two roles was particularly interesting and took place at the interior of the common zone of one of the housing modules. Osuna had gone to interview a youth in a room for common use:

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that all the prisons have the same architectural model. About changes to women prisons in Spain, see Almeda (2005).

it was summer, the weather was good and nearly all the women who were not participating in activities were on the patio of their module in the sun. The common room was peaceful and cool. A bit before ending the conversation, the woman asked if the researcher would like to see photos of the episodes of what she was speaking about (her life before incarceration). While waiting for her to return, a woman entered the module that Osuna did not recognize. The woman must not have seen Osuna's identification because right away she asked if Osuna was "new". Surprised, and while she reached for her identification, Osuna explained; "Well, no…I am here doing research, but thank you, that's kind". Then, the woman, who was about 50, placed her hands to her mouth and said she was sorry: "Please excuse me, I hadn't seen". She turned around, and then came back and said: "I am Concha, my pleasure". She explained that the first days were very difficult and only wanted to help Osuna feel better (in case she really was a new arrival to the prison). The hierarchy that was constructed between the "researcher" and "inmates" is different than what we defined in the case of Frois in a male prison. Here, the way that gender issues constitute asymmetries is exclusively enrooted in their belonging to class and status groups, that mark the distinction between social agents.

The initial focus of the study was on how educational policies were implemented in the prison, and the school was one of the main locations for observation. On the first day in which Osuna attended a class, as she explained her project and requested permission from the students to be with them in the classroom and conduct an interview later on, she felt an affinity with a woman about her age who watched from the last row with a broad and approving smile. She was seated next to another, about the same age, who to the contrary, appeared to not be interested in anything that was said. Farther in front, a woman with an air of distrust, who appeared to be about 50, said she would decide later if she would agree to participate in the study. Osuna would spend much time with these three women.

Four months after having begun the field work, on a morning on which there were no classes because it was a vacation period, the previously distrustful woman approached Osuna and said with total confidence: "You came to interview me, right?" Although she was not prepared to do a formal interview, Osuna did not let the opportunity go by. As was usual, she asked permission from an employee to go to one of the classrooms in the module because it was a more peaceful place to talk. The authority, and the respect that the inmates attributed to the staff of teachers, who, they certainly associated to the anthropologist, was always implicit in the relations that were constructed: "This researcher has been coming for a long time, she works with the teachers", the employees said to each other when there were doubts. Here there is an inversion of what followed in the male prison previously described: no problems arose in interviewing the women alone and there was no one monitoring them or interruptions. At one time she spent more than two hours in a closed room without any type of interruption or oversight. We believe that the fact that Osuna is a woman facilitated the construction of the interactions during the fieldwork and its dynamics. Simultaneously, we thought that this would not take place if she was a man because they would not allow him to be alone with a woman for such a long time. The sexualization of the evaluation of the interactions in the prison is one of the dimensions that influence the research conditions and the mobility of the researchers in a prison context. To be a woman conducting research is interpreted through grammars that are enrooted in contents of social categories of gender.

The interview with this woman marked a before and after in the relationship between the two. This time, she spoke of her childhood, her school, parents, adolescence, her first husband, and her daughters. However, the narrative seemed too linear, with an absence of the reason for which she was sentenced to prison. Questioned discretely about this issue, she began to say that Osuna made her remember her daughters, who she would like Osuna to meet because they were good persons and very studious.

This small reflection was the starting point for her to describe her life trajectory until entering prison. When the conversation ended, they met another woman with whom Osuna spoke regularly, who was sleeping in the shade. It was hot, but the patio was bustling. Some women were taking sun while lying on towels and periodically passing water and olive oil on their skin; a small group did aerobics; other women were sewing and some were speaking. Since there was still an hour before dinner and the time when Osuna would leave the prison facilities, they bought beverages and fried potatoes and spent the rest of the afternoon eating and talking. No prison guard asked any questions, or sought to police the interaction.

Two weeks later, Osuna returned to spend an afternoon in the prison. She met with one of the young women who she had encountered at the school and she noticed that the woman was all dressed up: wearing a short black dress, makeup and her hair was well combed." Osuna interrupted the conversation and said: "Lidia, you are very pretty today!", smiling, Lidia responded: "Thank you! I got dressed to go out, but changed my plans and decided to stay home…"It was not the first time that one of the women said, laughing, that she was "dressing up" to go out with friends or with her husband, using irony and a sense of humor to deal with the fact of being in prison. "To make themselves pretty" was a strategy the women used not only to participate in certain events or meet their companions or family members in the visitors room, but also, as they explained: "Once in a while we have to make ourselves pretty or we go crazy". A few moments later, she met two women with whom she often spent many afternoons, they were sitting along the wall of the patio. One of them, who had gone to court that day, said that she got all dressed up to go out: "You should have seen me, with my hair up, make-up, skirt-jacket… Pretty. Not like the other who had grease stains on his clothes… horrible". The "other" was her ex-companion. The effort and the investment to care for physical appearance shows that these women turn to hegemonic gender standards – which give excessive value to appearance in the judgement of the feminine –

just as strength and sexuality are important markers in the construction of asymmetries and power relations among the men.

Then they began to speak about men and romantic fiascos. Moving from theme to theme, they concluded that men "are all the same". Between laughter, stereotypes and a few curses, Osuna became immersed in one of the episodes that finally explained why she was sentenced and included details that had never been mentioned during the long interview that they had conducted on another occasion. This sharing of experiences and gender constraints that crossed groups of class approximated the researcher and the inmate, who were separated in their differentiated relations of power. Nevertheless, the contents of the hegemonic categories of gender brought them together. Thus, the complicity established between women in a prison context can be considered as a factor in the creation of communality and the creation of bridges of contact between people who did not have much in common before the establishment of this form of conviviality. Among the inmates, the common situation in which they were found, the separation that they shared from children and family members who depended on them, and the conditions of privation and vulnerability that marked their daily life before being arrested established a common base for their interaction and relations. Nevertheless, competition for places of power and access to scarce goods in prison could establish impediments to this communality and create deep asymmetries among them.

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The reports on the ethnographic research experiences have shown how the fact that we are women conditioned and shaped our research in prison contexts, and also created opportunities and restrictions that escaped, to a large degree, the initially defined methodological design. In the two cases, the fact that we are women was a determining element in the opening or closing of doors in access to the terrain and the understanding of the processes and interactions within prisons. In the female prison,

Osuna had the opportunity to circulate freely through nearly all of the spaces, and pass various hours conducting interviews without many restrictions or interruptions. In the male prison, Frois had a rigid limitation of movements because of the consideration that, as a woman, a violent situation could be triggered at any time that could place her in physical danger. Hammersley (2015:24) affirmed that "it is difficult to know what are [the social characteristics] that would be relevant in certain situations". Based on our experiences, we affirm that the fact of being a woman or a man in research in prison contexts decisively affects the relations that are constructed in the field, because it is highly marked by an exacerbation of elements that characterize gender categories. However, in analytical terms, more important than this question is the fact that these relations are constructed with a base in gender categories that have specific cultural contents that are simultaneously different and differentiated for the researchers and the people who constitute their context of analysis. We find clear examples of the premise assumed by prison authorities that a woman *among women* is not the target of a threat, while a woman *among men* can be the object and subject of violent acts; in the way that the inmates care for their physical image and questions of beauty, in the performance with which the men strive to maintain an image of virility and strength and compete for the moments of greater demonstration of their masculinity. The stereotypes that women are docile and want to be pretty and dressed up, and that men are violent and hypersexualized are visible both in the discourses of the guards and prison directors and in the institutional discursivity, which reveal how the prison institutions are organized based on categorizations of gender in their intersectionalities. The relation established by Osuna in the women's prison was facilitated by the fact she is a woman, but was not homogeneous and it was not a relationship among equals. The marks of class and profession create an hierarchy between the "inmates" and the "doctor" in an intersectional asymmetry that creates a distance to what biology seems to unite.

The relations that are established between the researchers and interlocutors in prisons are tenuous and fragile. They must know how to manage asymmetries, trust and distrust, at all levels and constantly. These asymmetries are, however, more profound than an initial analysis may suggest. It is certain that a prison is a place of power, exclusion, and confrontation that is not restricted to who dominates – the representatives of the institution: prison guards, directors, teachers, or judges and lawyers – even if these are the people whose exercise of and claim to power is legitimated. Yet in practice, the asymmetries are constantly reinforced in the inmates' interactions with each other and with others and in relation to authority. Gender issues are also fundamental in this realm. The specific cultural contents of these categories of differentiation are permanently at the base of construction of the relations established within prisons and correspond to hegemonic models outside them. The conflicts and disputes, situate each man in relation to a hegemonic masculinity: a man who does not accept an afront and who reacts to it; a man who is respected and earns respect from other inmates and the guards. In the female prison, the ideal of woman, and of femininity, is also convoked through the critical appreciation of the other: how inmates dress, behave, and present themselves. In the prisons where we conducted research, racial issues did not gain primacy, but, differences introduced by nationality and ethnicity were important markers of difference between men and women who were potentially equals.

The prison can be understood as an institution that makes bodies docile (to use Foucault's celebrated expression), which shapes them for a normative ideal – the compliant, obedient person. Many ethnographies conducted in prison contexts tend to expose examples of this imposition of submission. This criticism excludes, however, the capacity for agency among incarcerated people. That is, we understand that submission and conformism should be analyzed from another perspective: through the exacerbated, at times to an extreme, hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Thus, a man should be masculine, powerful and

reactive towards others. The submission and conformism imposed by the institution therefore gives place to forms of resistance and manifestations of power that seek to show this virility, even when in confinement and deprived of liberty (and here we convoke both the work of Mary Bosworth, 1999; Thomas Ugelvik, 2014, and the "hidden transcripts" of the art of resistance studied by James Scott, 1992). In the case of women, our observations show that the characteristics that are ideally attributed to the feminine – docility and maternity – are emphasized through appearance and care for the body. A woman who cares for her hair, her body, who "dresses-up" well and cares for herself. This also reveals a resistance to the institution and to submission; to not allow that they become mere confined subjects. Their "weapon", and form of *resisting* is precisely through this care for the body, so that the presentation of the self, as Goffman (1993) teaches, reveals elements symbolically associated to hegemonic femininity: to be dressed-up, to have painted nails, gray hairs hidden, thus becomes a form of resistance.

Ethnography in prison, ethnography of the prison: their limits

> So-called participant observation has a way of drawing the ethnographer into spaces of human life where she or he might really prefer not to go at all and once there doesn't know how to go about getting out except through writing, which draws others there as well, making them party to the act of witnessing. (Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, 1992:xii).

A final element that we want to discuss is how, in research in a prison context, ethnographers work with narratives about the trajectories of people with whom they work, in particular when criminal activities are described. The fact that we are women influenced our capacity to feel empathy, proximity or distancing relative to our interlocutors. Crewe *et al.* (2016) highlight that issues related to "shame, guilt or a search for redemption" are central to prison studies, in particular when we consider how these feelings

are included in narratives of people when they are completing a sentence and determine how they guide their life in prison.

Our own subjectivity and perceptions as women-researchers, with experiences of life lived and specific trajectories and contexts, cannot be ignored (See for ex. Geertz, 1983). If Osuna never felt true fear within the prison, in the other case, Frois (similarly to Fransson and Johnsen, 2015), was always aware of the condition of being *one* [woman] among many[men], in which her body and senses remained in constant alert. For Frois, the apparent distance with which the men described their crimes was emotionally taxing, and she was constantly required to not let her personal identity interfere with the exercise of her profession. Given that it is common in prison literature to affirm, as does Hulley *et al.* (2015), that people who live in incarceration affirm that they become "very cold, very hard and intransigent" people, it is certain that their narratives may have impacts on listeners that they are not always able to avoid or even hide. We are speaking of personal limits in relation to the research context, an issue that should not be neglected in this context. It is not being a woman or a man that determines an empathy or repulsion that we develop with our interlocutors (Crewe; Ievins, 2015; Drake, 2015). It is to be a person, with a personal history, with a trajectory composed of conditioning factors, contexts and choices.

In other words: the situation of being in a room to speak with a person (a man or woman) who is 18, 20, or 30 years old, talking about episodes in their life, is not particularly distinct or disturbing. However, in those places of confinement and punishment, sensorial elements were decisive in our understanding of the situations and webs of relations that we analyzed. In the case of Frois, the noise that passed through the thin plywood walls seemed like shouting that got louder and louder and appeared to represent situations among the inmates that were out of control. However, the impact of the clamor was different on the two interlocutors: in her first days, Frois felt unsettled, contrasting with the tranquility of the person in front of her, regardless of what was happening outside, he continued to talk and tell his story. There

was a moment in one of the interviews in which the exaltation was so intense that she asked the interlocutor if there was a problem. At first the man did not understand the question, but later explained "no, that's how it is". He had already become accustomed to that background noise, it was nearly as if it was the soundtrack at Linhó. The normalization of the contact with situations of physical, verbal or symbolic aggressivity promoted distinct forms of emotional reaction to these situations. To analyze this emotional experience and its meanings is, therefore, an important dimension in our work at prisons, because this experiential dimension reveals social and cultural meanings that are central to our understanding of the context that we are analyzing (Rosaldo, 1984; Lima, 1993).

The difference between this place and others where we conducted research in the past was also obvious, as was the differences in the life paths of those people who were the same age as the students to whom we give classes. They had lives of violence, poverty, social exclusion, discrimination – in most cases from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood: until they began to commit crimes, and during their criminal trajectory and their incarceration. These men and women were active and passive subjects of violence, victims and perpetrators of crime, and assumed this dual agency during our conversations, in the line suggested by Bähre (2015).[6]

To do fieldwork in a prison context involves significant specificities that the literature has been emphasizing in recent years, (see Drake; Earle; Sloan, 2015). Various authors discuss the physical, emotional and affective demands involved in interactions with inmates, prison guards, and the physical environment of a prison. For an anthropologist who frequently develops empathetic relations (and of friendship) with people who are interlocutors, this can be an additional difficulty and a methodological challenge. Some decisions can be taken *ab initio*.

[6] Bähre (2015) suggests something similar in his reflection about ethnography in relation to issues of violence and victimization in South Africa.

If men and women are in separate prisons, a researcher can decide in advance to work with men or women. This involves some preliminary notions, for example, relative to the criminal past. Criminological statistics and studies demonstrate that women rarely commit crimes that involve physical confrontation or violence, there are very few cases of women who are sexual abusers; crimes of domestic violence or involving harmful treatment of children are a minority among the female prison population.[7] That is, the choice of place where the study is conducted can consider the degree of violence to which a researcher is ready to be exposed to, and the same consideration in relation to the people with whom a researcher will speak at the location.

Frois deliberately chose to work with men and women, while Osuna chose a female prison. If, for one the question was not determinant, the other recognized that this relationship would be easier. Moreover, when Frois began her fieldwork, she was not concerned with selecting the types of crime committed by the men with whom she would interact; she was interested in their trajectories before prison, and in the experience of incarceration. She was thus exposed to descriptions of acts that she felt to be repugnant or abject, because of both the graphic detail with which they were described – which she felt was done purposely to create an impact - and the violence involved. Osuna, in turn, benefitted from a more informal environment, and purposely avoided interviewing women who had committed crimes of blood against their children. Her experience as an anthropologist was not enough to be immune from prejudice. As a result of the liberty of circulation from which she benefitted and of the ease of access to the inmates, Osuna developed close relations with them and in this way, a significant level of complicity and empathy. The women

[7] The literature about crime, violence and poor treatment of women have had significant expression in the past two decades, see, among others Bloom (2003); Cardi; Pruvost (2011); Carlen; Worral (2014); Gomes; Duarte (2018); Moore; Scranton (2014); Rowe (2012).

with whom she spent more time sought to protect her, warning: "Don't get close to this one who killed her children and is horrible", thus assuming the sanctions and the gender models analyzed by Juliano (2010).

It is obvious that the fact of being a woman or a man created only an apparent base of identification, established by guaranteed similarities in taste, expectations, choices and worldview. But the questions that we raise about the ethnographic limits are not restricted to the relationship that we establish with inmates. The empathy or repulsion for our interlocutors and for their acts extends to prison guards, directors and employees. The feelings experienced during the fieldwork such as impotence, pity, compassion, repulsion or revolt towards what is told to us or what we directly experience, convoke questions of subjectivity that can become unexpected, and condition the continuity of the research. Therefore, these subjectivities and the reflexivity about who we are and how we position ourselves as social scientists and or people, tend to be forgotten. Without wanting to fall into the extremes of interpretive tendencies of the 1980s, we agree with Jewkes' (2012:66) affirmation that the absence of reflection on the "reactions to what are frequently challenging and extremely emotional environments" cause prison researchers to contribute little to the preparation of new researchers upon entering the field (see also Jewkes; Wright, 2016).

We believe this is a trap that we can link to the initial reflections about the geographic context. In the same way that we must discuss the analyses and theories that are formulated about certain places and the validity of their use in other territorial, political, ideological and economic spaces – we must also move forward in how we reflect and publish our data. That is, to frame criminal practices in their relationship with phenomena of social exclusion, poverty, discrimination or racism does not allow leaving out of the analysis the life trajectory of these subjects, including acts classified as crimes, how individuals positions themselves in relation to them, how they regard themselves, and recognize or reject the classifications that are imputed to them. It is this holistic

view of subjects that allows us to capture their identities, how they position themselves, and what strategies they use and mobilize.

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