

## Approaching the Project: From Theory to Practice

In February 2018, I was employed by the Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy (Ghent University) to do a small research project on South African prisons. By this time, I had been living in Belgium for little under a year and was excited for the opportunity to conduct research back in my home country. As a point of departure, I looked to Tom Vander Beken's publication, *The Role of Prisons in Europe: Travelling in the Footsteps of John Howard* (2016). Inspired by the travels of prison reformer John Howard (1726-1790), Vander Beken uses the method of prison tourism to conduct comparative research of prisons across six European countries (England, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Italy and Azerbaijan). In undertaking this research, he seeks to understand the purposes to which today's prisons are put, allowing his observations to be guided by the question, "What are prisons for?"

Intrigued with Vander Beken's (2016) guiding question, I decided to draw from this approach. I too wanted to use the method of prison tourism to conduct research in South Africa, anchored by the question: *What are the South African prisons of today for? i.e. What purpose(s) do they serve?*

### *The South African Context*

When I started my research, I was by no means an expert on South African prisons – neither on their history, nor their actuality. I knew that South African prisons had long been notorious places of exile, with a long history of prisoner exploitation and political detainment pre 1994. But this was, I believe, very much layman’s knowledge. And even though it had been 24 years since the country’s political transformation to democracy, I did not know much about the extent to which South African prisons were truly reflecting the country’s new constitutional ideals. Whatever I did know, seemed to be formed at large by my own experiences as a South African citizen. I could tell you that in South Africa, talk of prison was almost always equated with talk of gangsterism, brutality, the violation of human rights, serious health concerns and issues of gross overcrowding. In a previous thesis I had written on gangsterism in the Western Cape province of South Africa (2016), it had also become clear to me that the country’s political narratives concerning criminals were very much that of ‘*once a criminal, always a criminal*’, with there being very little acknowledgment of desistance from crime. I found this quite disconcerting, especially in light of the government’s formal commitment to criminal rehabilitation – even going so far as to rename all prisons *correctional centres*. At the very least, this discrepancy between national government strategies and local political narratives confused me. What was actually happening inside South African prisons? What purpose were they actually serving?

In struggling with these questions, I had very little knowledge to answer them sufficiently. When I was finally given the opportunity to do research on South African prisons, I knew I had to choose a methodology that would allow me to first explore the realities of these spaces, precisely because of what I did not know. This acknowledg-

ment of *not knowing*, is what ultimately informed my decision in choosing for the method of prison tourism, hoping that it would, at least in part, allow me to experience the prison environment of South Africa first-hand.

### *Starting from Theory: Prison Tourism*

I was, of course, very aware that the use of prison tourism as a general research method would be subject to some criticisms. Even though Wacquant (2002) had so boldly urged prison researchers to ‘get in and out of the belly of the beast’, many scholars have since argued against it, asserting that prison tours do not only limit the quality of research, but also run the risk of failing to protect the dignity of prisoners (See for example Dey 2009; Huckelbury 2009; Minogue 2009; Nagelsen and Huckelbury 2009; Piché and Walby 2010, 2012). I certainly found myself echoing these concerns. Much like the term ‘prison tourism’ suggests, I was afraid that my participation in prison tours would allow me to produce little more than descriptions of scripted, regulated experiences of prison life. I was also concerned that prisoners would be presented simply as objects during these visits, rather than dignified subjects central to my research. Even though I understood that the limitations of prison tourism could not be completely overridden, I set out to at least be transparent about such limitations and try to counter them as best I could.

Being transparent meant at least two things. First, in deciding to use prison tourism as my general research method, I needed to admit that my fieldwork would not be yielding generalisable knowledge. As Vander Beken so aptly states: When it comes to prison tourism, “one can only say something about what one has seen, heard, experienced and read first-hand” (Vander Beken, 2016: viii). Note here that the failure to produce generalisable knowledge does not deem research

either insubstantial or unimportant. On the contrary, I wanted my research to openly embrace such a limitation, utilising it as a strength in its own right. My aim was not to write a book on prisons of the world, or even the intricate workings of South African prison systems as a whole, nor to give a detailed account of its complex history. The aim was simply to be present, and to report on my experiences as a prison visitor as openly and as honestly as I could. In this way, I wanted to be the eyes and ears for a public who will never get to experience these spaces. My aim was to write honestly about the things I would see, hear and experience during these visits. Of course, the results of such an approach would not be generalisable, and yet it need not be. Secondly, I wanted to allow space to reflect on how these prison visits would impact on me as a person. This marked the second dimension of transparency, acknowledging beforehand that the research would indeed have me “expose some of [my] own identity and motivations” (Whetter, 2015: 327).

### *Stepping into Practice: Between ‘Prison Ethnography’ and ‘Narrative Criminology’*

During my preparation phase, I soon realised that I would be approaching my fieldwork ethnographically, and it was important for me to explore the implications of this. As a prison ethnographer, I knew that my work had to lean more towards “the art of depiction rather than the science of discovery” (Drake, Earle and Sloan, 2015: 3). While most depictions would of course relate to what I had in fact seen, heard or experienced, there would also be the element of depicting things ‘not there’ (Gordon, 2008). In other words, apart from reporting on my own experiences, I would also need to be aware of (and alert to) “the ghosts of racialised regimes past, the sediment of dirty industry that seeps into and imbues the present...”

(Schept, 2014: 203). As I conducted in-depth research prior to my fieldwork, I was therefore particularly concerned with learning more about South African (prison) history, echoing the words of Faulkner when he said: “[t]he past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, 1951). In researching this past, my aim was thus to better observe and depict the present.

Secondly, I followed Minogue (2009) in his assertion that whatever is to be gained from prison tours, will also largely depend on the attitude of the researcher (132). Consequently, I wanted my research to be presented in a way that allowed me to be open about my attitude (how I presented myself in these spaces, how I responded to others, what my initial thoughts and reactions were, etc.). In short, I needed a method that would allow me to write in the same way that I would experience. Knowing that my observations would necessarily be filtered by subjectivity, I chose to openly reflect this through the use of first-person narrative.

Thirdly, I was inspired by Whetter’s (2015) assertion that prison ethnography could also be understood as “a resistance against a pre-occupation with prison statistics and the audit culture that tends to dehumanise prisoners” (327). Indeed, my aim was not to give depictions of statistics and complex systems, but rather to have (ex-) prisoners and the real-life concerns relating to them, stand central. I found that one way to achieve this was to draw from the field of narrative criminology. Following Presser (2016), I maintained that *the* analytic focal point for narrative criminologists is that of subjectivity (2016: 139). The narrative criminologist is interested in people’s stories, contending that these stories play an important role “in understanding the causes of crime and in efforts to control crime” (Agnew, 2006: 119). By placing an emphasis on the importance of subjectivity and understanding that subjectivity is always forged discursively (Presser, 2016: 139), discourse became central to the research. To this end, I set

out to rely, as often as possible, on the spoken narratives of prisoners and ex-prisoners during my fieldwork.

### *Preparing for Fieldwork*

While this book mainly reports on my weeks of fieldwork in South Africa, stepping into such fieldwork necessitated months of preparation. During my early attempts to lay the groundwork for this research, I had tried to gain support from the research unit of South Africa's Department of Correctional Services (DCS). Unfortunately, this turned out to be the longest and least fruitful route I could take. As a prerequisite for entering prisons for research purposes, the DCS required a full research proposal, including hypotheses and a full list of questions I would be asking during interviews. While these requests were certainly reasonable and in line with the execution of ethical research, they also posed somewhat of a threat to what I wanted my research to achieve – which was precisely *not* to affirm or refute hypotheses. I wished for both prisons and prisoners to introduce a myriad of themes and insights to me, rather than setting them up to partake in a predetermined study in which I simply had to 'fill in the blanks'.

For some time, the preparation phase continued to look dismal. I wasn't really able to sell the concept of prison tours to the DCS and was slowly starting to doubt the viability of the project. Meanwhile, I had set out to counter this liminal space by investing more time in the study of South African prison literature. During this time, I came across the following passage in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994):

The most important person in any prisoner's life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head

of prison, but the warden in one's section. If you are cold and want an extra blanket, you might petition the minister of justice, but you will get no response. If you go to the commissioner of prisons, he will say, "Sorry, it is against regulations". The head of prison will say, "If I give you an extra blanket, I must give one to everyone". But if you approach the warden in your corridor, and you are on good terms with him, he will simply go to the stockroom and fetch a blanket. (Mandela, 1994: 247)

I still remember reading this passage and smiling at the thought of Nelson Mandela sending me advice from the grave, for these were the words I so desperately needed at the time. I knew then, that in order for this project to succeed, I had to shift my focus away from ministers, commissioners and department heads. I needed symbolic wardens – those people I could more easily build relationship with. This is when I decided to change my approach. I started to do research on the various ministry organisations working in prisons, asking whether they would be willing to assist in this project. Many of these organisations were formally partnered with the DCS in providing various programmes to prisoners. As a result, they were able to secure my prison visits in light of my participation in their ongoing prison projects. At the same time, I started to reach out to prison chaplains, who took the risk of not only trusting me, but also pointing me in the right directions. Having the support of ministry organisations and prison chaplains certainly went a long way in understanding the South African prison system and building a strong and trusted network between myself and various other members of prison staff. Furthermore, I had taken the liberty of personally contacting various Heads of Prison, asking whether they would be willing to arrange any prison tours for me in light of my research. While most of these requests remained unanswered, I did manage to secure one prison visit in this way (Voorberg, Chapter 10). Overall, I quickly

came to appreciate the necessity of first establishing trust relationships with individuals who worked in the system. In the end, they became the symbolic ‘warders’ who made it possible for me to conduct this research.

### *Conducting Fieldwork*

This book reports on fieldwork conducted between 22 May and 22 June 2018. During these weeks, I used a paper notebook for the collection of all my fieldnotes – which included the details of my prison visits, the content of interviews, as well as diary entries of a more personal nature. For the purposes of this research, no type of recording device was ever used. The use of recording devices was firstly not permitted inside prisons, and even when researching outside of prison buildings, I felt that the presence of such devices would hinder the conversations. Every meeting with an interviewee was held with their prior knowledge that our conversation would be forming a part of my research for this book. I also shared this with prisoners themselves whenever I had the opportunity to engage in conversation with them.

The chapters of this book follow the chronological order of my fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> Although the body of this work is written in first-person narrative (leaning toward journal-style writing), I have tried to include the spoken narratives of others as often as possible. For ethical reasons, most speakers remain anonymous or are referred to under pseudonyms. Exceptions to this can be found in chapters 4 (Marius), 6 (Malherbe), 8 (Xola) and 9 (Mandla). In these cases, interviews were held outside of prisons and all interviewees were willing to share their stories autobiographically. I also kept in contact with them during

1 — With the exception of Chapter 3, where I discuss three separate sessions spent with the same group of prisoners at Drakenstein Correctional Centre.



my writing phase, sending them their respective chapters prior to publication, so as to confirm that I had accurately represented the facts pertaining to their stories.

Prior to the publication of this book, some concerns were uttered regarding the chosen title, specifically regarding the phrase “prisons and its people.” Some argued that this would be read as a grammatical error, rather than an instance of literary freedom. To native English speakers, I foresee no problem in the wording used. Nevertheless, it remains valuable to know that the rejection of the phrase “their people” had been an intentional decision on my part. Personally, I felt that the use of “their” in a context such as this would not only be dangerously possessive, but also alienating – as is often the case with words that delineate between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. One of my strongest convictions following the research for this book is that there is no *them* – only *us*. And in the end, it was my wish for the title to leave the necessary room for such an interpretation.

Finally, it is important to note that, when drawing from narrative criminology, one needs not necessarily be in search for “the truth” behind stories. Following Presser and Sandberg (2019), I had been far more concerned with appreciating *the multitude of stories present* within the social context of my fieldwork (See Sandberg, 2010: 462). My aim was thus to include as many of these stories as possible, rather than seeking to fact-check them for their accuracy. Guiding me in this regard was the assertion by Sandberg (2010) that by “seeking answers to what narrative repertoire is available, why particular people emphasise particular stories, and how they go about doing this, we shed light on both them and their social context” (462). In following this assertion, I decided to include all stories as they were presented; using them as analytical focal points in my research, without having to qualify them in light of their “truth”.