

Who's Asking? Participatory Action Research, Interviewer Bias, and the Production of Knowledge in Prison

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Does it **matter who is asking the question in prison research?**

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

- Power sharing
- Empowered participation
- Action
 - ...with coresearchers

“Enabling people in prison to participate in research design (including defining measurements and collecting data) can enhance findings and yield positive change by making reforms more accurate, credible, and useful.”

Farrell et al., with Fine (2021:6)
Participatory Research in Prisons
Urban Institute

Center for Correctional Solutions

PAR in Arizona

- 2 Projects (2017, 2020)
 - Reducing Recidivism
 - Enhancing the Prison Environment
- Medium Security Men's Prison
- 6 Trained Interviewers
- Nearly 800 interviews completed

Haverkate et al. (2017)

On PAR with the Yard: Participatory Action Research to Advance Knowledge in Corrections
Corrections: Policy, Practice, and Research, 5(1), 28-43

“We believe answers are more honest when asked by fellow prisoners as opposed to a university researcher...Prisoners, oftentimes, portray a front to people they do not know. Our research showed 12% were homeless/couch-to-couch prior to their incarceration. If research was completed by the university researchers, we believe the numbers would be artificially less than what we found.”

Thrasher et al. (2019:20)

Reimagining Prison Research from the Inside-Out
Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 28(1), 12-28.

“The fact that we were interviewed by fellow prisoners made it much easier to be completely honest. The interviewers spoke our language...The interviewers allowed me trust that my answers would be to “our” benefit as prisoners and not to “our” detriment.”

Shaun, as quoted in Thrasher et al. (2019:23)

Nagging Issues

Are we creating new knowledge?

Are we missing ethical concerns in taking this approach?

Does it **matter** who is asking the question in prison research?

Research Questions

Are we creating new knowledge?

- Do responses to trust questions vary by interviewer type?
- Do responses to open-ended questions on the prison experience vary by interviewer type?

Are we missing ethical concerns in taking this approach?

- Do responses to comfort level of interview vary by interviewer type?

	ASU (n = 80)	Incarcerated (n = 78)
Age	39.31 (11.08)	41.59 (12.32)
Children	2.45 (1.74)	2.58 (1.76)
Children < 18 years	1.39 (1.55)	1.36 (1.39)
Times to prison	1.76 (1.22)	2.13 (2.43)
Years incarcerated	5.59 (6.72)	5.41 (5.81)
Longest time incarcerated	6.46 (6.40)	6.88 (5.81)
White	39%	46%
Black	6%	4%
Hispanic	29%	32%
Other	27%	18%
Single	42%	54%
First time in prison	62%	56%
More than high school	48%	67%

Do responses to trust questions vary by interviewer type?

15 True/False questions on what trust means on the unit

14 Never – Always questions on involvement with other women

You can't talk to women on this unit about personal matters without being judged

Response	False	True
Interviewer		
ASU	24 (33%)	48 (67%)
Incarcerated	35 (47%)	39 (53%)

$\chi^2 = 2.96, p = .086$

Do responses to open-ended questions vary by interviewer type?

ASU
(n = 80)

Incarcerated
(n = 78)

Tell me something about yourself or your life you are proud of.

Personal Growth and Resilience

72%

51%

What is your favorite way to pass your time in here and why?

Self-Betterment & Productivity

74%

53%

Tell me about your best experience with a member of staff

None/Negative

26%

8%

What is the difference between an ordinary day and a great day?

Positive Environment/Tolerable Conditions

75%

42%

Do responses to comfort level of interview vary by interviewer type?

Would you have been more comfortable completing this interview with [someone incarcerated at Cruz OR an ASU researcher]?

Do responses to comfort level of interview vary by interviewer type?

Response	Doesn't Matter	Would NOT Be More Comfortable
Interviewer		
ASU	21 (26%)	59 (74%)
Incarcerated	49 (63%)	29 (37%)

$\chi^2 = 21.40, p < .001$

Talked to ASU, Preferred ASU

- They are not legitimate; They will share the information and antagonize
- Do not trust incarcerated women at Santa Cruz
- "They are like me"; higher respect for someone from ASU
- Fear or apprehension that answers will be discussed elsewhere
- I would've thought it was fake
- Because they judge you (incarcerated women); easy to be honest with someone that she doesn't know

Talked to Cruz, Preferred Cruz

- More comfortable with someone in orange that can relate
- Because my interviewer is an inmate & we have shared experiences, understand what it's like, an ASU person wouldn't care
- I feel like with inmates you can be more open with what happens inside of here
- Easier to talk to incarcerated women who understand
- Because I would be more comfortable with an inmate because I feel like an ASU researcher will be judgmental

Research Questions

Are we creating new knowledge?

- Do responses to trust questions vary by interviewer type?
 - No
- Do responses to open-ended questions on the prison experience vary by interviewer type?
 - No, with a few exceptions

Are we missing ethical concerns in taking this approach?

- Do responses to comfort level of interview vary by interviewer type?
 - Yes

Challenges and Implications

Sample size and composition

Context matters

- Identity
- Topic

Our work ahead...



Thrasher et al. (2019:16)

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“We strongly recommend that, if given the opportunity, every prisoner should experience the unfamiliar sensations and thought processes that come along with conducting meaningful research. For us, there exists a newfound motivation to be involved and make a difference.”