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Who's asking? Participatory research, interviewer effects, and the production of knowledge in a women's prison

Kevin A. Wright[1] · **Jacob T.N. Young**[1] · **Alexis N. Klemm**[1]

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Abstract

Objectives To examine participatory research (PR) in a women's prison to assess: (1) whether incarcerated interviewers elicit different knowledge than outside interviewers and (2) whether incarcerated interviewers are perceived as more trustworthy than outside interviewers.

Methods We conducted a randomized experiment with 158 incarcerated women in Arizona, assigning participants to be interviewed by either an incarcerated ($n=78$) or outside ($n=80$) interviewer. Participants discussed their experiences of trust and relationships within the prison environment, as well as their comfort level with the assigned interviewer.

Results We observed few statistically significant differences between conditions. However, perceptions of interviewer trustworthiness varied: participants assigned to incarcerated interviewers more often voiced concerns about confidentiality and information sharing.

Conclusions This study contributes to inclusive prison research approaches that engage incarcerated people as partners in the research process. However, using incarcerated interviewers raises ethical concerns, including risks related to perceived coercion and harm.

Introduction

Much of what we think we know about prison has been told to us by people who are incarcerated. Prison researchers document prison life through questionnaires and interviews, with well-known ideas in criminology having originated through scholars talking to people on the inside. For example, Sykes (1958) documented the pains of

✉ Kevin A. Wright
kevinwright@asu.edu

[1] School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Arizona State University, 411 N. Central Ave., Ste. 600, Phoenix, MC, AZ 4420, 85004, USA

imprisonment in a men's prison, and Giallombardo (1966) identified the formation of kinship ties in a women's prison, through observations and interactions behind the walls. Other scholars, such as Barbara Owen and colleagues, have continued this tradition through ethnographic and mixed-methods research that offers rich, contextual understandings of women's experiences in prison (Owen, 1998; Owen et al., 2017).

Although ethnographic work has persisted in various forms since these classic studies, access to prisons has become increasingly restricted, limiting the opportunities for long-term immersion that once characterized this tradition. In this sense, the slowdown refers not to a disappearance of ethnography but to structural and institutional constraints on ethnographic access (Wacquant, 2002; cf. Rudes, 2022). As a result, new knowledge depends even more firmly on interview research, including with hard-to-reach incarcerated populations such as people in solitary confinement (Wright, 2023) and prison gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019). But for all this work, people who are incarcerated may be suspicious or distrustful of academics—'outside researchers' who never truly 'get it' (Crewe, 2014; Liebling, 1999; Toch, 1967). People in prison may also describe prison life in ways that they perceive as socially desirable. They could, for example, portray prison life as worse than reality in order to shine additional light on their current situation. Or, they could portray prison life as better than reality in an effort to appear tough and resilient to the harshness of incarceration. In short, interviewer effects may distort the data for what we think we know about prison. Despite being widely assumed, these effects have rarely been tested empirically, motivating the present study.

An intriguing alternative to traditional prison interview research lies in participatory research (PR) methodologies. PR is research *with* people rather than *on* people, and traditional interview subjects become interview co-researchers involved at each stage of the research process (Farrell, 2021; Fine, 2001; Telep et al., 2020). PR in prison may include incarcerated interviewers who go through institutional review board (IRB) and qualitative interviewing training to then carry out interviews with their peers (Haverkate et al., 2020; McNaull et al., 2024). This method could remove the interviewer effects identified above when 'insiders' are interviewed by 'inside researchers.' In one study using this method, an incarcerated interview subject wrote about his experience being interviewed by another incarcerated man: "The fact that we were interviewed by fellow prisoners made it much easier to be completely honest. The interviewers spoke our language…I was able to let my guard down and totally relax…the interviewers allowed me trust that my answers would be to 'our' benefit as prisoners and not to 'our' detriment" (Thrasher et al., 2019:23; see also McNaull et al., 2023). PR with inside interviewers comes as part of a "lived experience criminology" (Antojado, 2023) that is guided by the mantra "nothing about us, without us" (Charlton, 1998). In his 2023 American Society of Criminology (ASC) Presidential Address, Maruna (2025) spoke of the value of "knowledge equity" (Harriott et al., 2024) and how researchers have much to learn alongside people with lived experience. He closed his address with a call for PR as a critical component to "desistance as a social movement" (Maruna, 2017)—linking participatory approaches to a broader effort to share knowledge production and foster trust between researchers and those most affected by the justice system.

This potential of PR with inside interviewers to improve upon traditional prison research rests on at least two untested assumptions. The first assumption is that inside interviewers produce knowledge that is different than what would be produced by outside interviewers.[1] Nearly sixty years ago, Toch (1967: 72, emphasis added) wrote about 'the convict as researcher' and shared why he and his team relied on 'nonprofessionals' with lived experience: "First, and most obviously, the empirical reason: they bring us better results. They are able to establish trust where we are not, *to get data that we could not get*, and to obtain it in the subjects' own language." A true test of the different knowledge assumption would require random assignment of incarcerated subjects to either an inside interviewer or an outside interviewer in the same study setting. A comparison of data across interviewer type could then speak to whether inside interviewers produce different knowledge.

The second assumption is that incarcerated subjects do indeed perceive fellow inside interviewers as more trustworthy with their information (i.e., that it would be used for "our" benefit). Unlike traditional research conducted by outside researchers, however, inside interviewers live and work in a confined setting with their interview subjects. Knowledge is power in prison (Kreager et al., 2017), and people in prison could be distrustful of what inside interviewers may do with their information (McKenzie & Wright, 2024). PR with inside interviewers could unintentionally produce physical or emotional harm for people in prison when sensitive information is shared with others.[2] A test of the trustworthiness assumption would be to directly ask people in prison if they would rather be interviewed by an inside or outside researcher. Taken together, a more nuanced examination of PR with inside interviewers could answer the questions: (1) does the approach produce different knowledge? and (2) are inside interviewers perceived as more trustworthy than outside interviewers?

In the current study, we examine these assumptions about inside interviewers through a PR project in a women's prison in Arizona. Our research team interviewed 158 women about their experiences while incarcerated, to include their perceptions of trust among other women on the unit, their experiences with staff members, and their overall assessment of day-to-day life living in that prison. Critically, interview subjects were randomly assigned to be interviewed by either an inside researcher ($n=78$) or an outside researcher ($n=80$), enabling a controlled test of interviewer positionality effects. Our broader purpose is to inform whether PR with inside interviewers can produce new knowledge about what we think we know about prison without producing further harm to those who experience it. We conclude with how our results can inform research designs in violence prevention and mental and behavioral health interventions that rest upon similar untested assumptions of lived experience research.

[1] Although proponents of PR with inside researchers imply the data are 'better,' we use the term 'different' rather than 'better,' 'valid,' or 'true' given we cannot claim there is some ontological truth of prison life that we can learn. Nonetheless, if PR with inside researchers did produce 'better' data, however known, we would expect to observe that these data are at least different than data produced by outsider researchers. We return to this issue below in the conclusion section.

[2] For example, romantic relationships between women in prison can be characterized by power and control (Klemm & Wright, 2025). Knowing someone is in a relationship with another person in prison could be used against them in a coercive or retaliatory manner.

Background

Participatory research

PR methodologies have their roots in action research that emphasizes a connection between traditional research and the capacity for change (Lewin, 1946). People most impacted by that change are invited and empowered to engage in solutions-oriented practice informed by the research. Adding participants to action research includes and empowers people traditionally treated as subjects within the research process itself. They become co-researchers, and their intimate knowledge of specific contexts and situations can complement scholarly knowledge and methods while increasing confidence that the research will benefit the community of study. For example, public health researchers have employed PR approaches to study low-income or rural communities that were distrustful of researchers (Baum et al., 2006; see also Slocum et al., 2024). PR approaches can lead to a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by communities and what to do about those challenges.

PR in criminology can be a powerful method to center the lived experience of people who are system-involved (Fine & Torre, 2006). It is in some ways a revived form of public criminology (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010) as PR scholars leave the "antiseptic criminology" (Cullen, 2010) behind in their offices when they do their work outside within the community. They then go one step further, however, by including the community in the work itself (Stone & Boppre, 2023). These approaches also build on the earlier tradition of convict criminology, which emphasized the legitimacy of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars as producers of criminological knowledge (Ross, 2024). This work anticipated many of the same commitments to lived experience and knowledge equity that define contemporary participatory research in prisons. Participatory approaches in prisons vary in scope, from projects where incarcerated collaborators conduct specific components of research to those that aim for full partnership across all stages—from defining research questions to interpreting and disseminating results. Achieving this fuller form of collaboration, however, remains especially difficult in correctional environments, where security restrictions, limited access to information, and institutional hierarchies constrain participation beyond data collection.

While these traditions advance a more inclusive vision of knowledge production, the realities of conducting participatory research in prisons reveal these persistent structural and interpersonal barriers. A number of interruptions, inconveniences, and inconsistencies inhibit meaningful social connections on the inside, especially when establishing one-time consent for information exchange between strangers (Reiter, 2014). Formal consent is a requirement, with a sordid history of research experimentation leading to university IRBs declaring prisoners a protected population (Hornblum, 1997). Nearly all of the human interaction that prisoners have is with one another and with correctional staff charged with their care. Abuse by staff happens, but it is the more mundane and frequent forms of procedural injustice that create mistrust (for a review, see Ryan & Bergin, 2022). Prisoners are therefore uniquely situated—protected by university IRB while having their freedoms restricted by the

state and its agents. Prisons as a research site represent a complicated social dynamic where trust and rapport are expected with some humans but not others.

Prisoner and researcher collaborations have overcome these challenging circumstances for the co-creation of knowledge. On an individual level, scholars may join or assist incarcerated authors to produce book-length manuscripts published by university presses (Carceral, 2005; George, 2010; Hassine, 2010; Maloney, 2025; see Piche et al., 2014). These collaborations empower and center the voices of people incarcerated as data and knowledge that do not pass through the filter of an outside researcher. On a collective level, research teams may join or assist groups of people incarcerated to study in-prison topics. Michelle Fine and colleagues (2003) pioneered modern forms of PR in prisons, beginning with a 1995 project evaluating the impact of college classes in a women's prison in New York. Seven incarcerated women joined faculty and graduate students as part of the College in Prison research collective to design and carry out focus groups, interviews, and surveys. "Prisoner and outside collaborative wit" (Fine & Torre, 2006:262) produced a solutions-focused, holistic report to the study of college in prison highlighted by PR-enriched data (Fine, 2001).

More recently, Haverkate and colleagues (2020) described a PR project where five incarcerated men joined university researchers to study recidivism and reentry in Arizona. The five men completed semi-structured interview training and human subjects research training before participating in instrument design, recruitment, consenting, interviewing, and sense-making of data. The inside researchers interviewed all 409 fellow incarcerated men who comprised the study sample. The research team reported high rates of cooperation and reduced power differentials between researcher and participant as benefits of their approach. In a companion article written entirely by the inside researchers, Thrasher et al. (2019:15) wrote about their "life-altering experience" of conducting research. They believed their data were more accurate than what would be produced by outside interviewers alone, and that they were better able to navigate the culture within prison. Specifically, they thought that different, less truthful answers would be provided to outside researchers asking questions such as "At the time of your most recent arrest, what was your housing situation?" and "What are your biggest fears upon release?" Stated differently, based on their opinion, what we think we know as obtained through traditional research methods would be inaccurate. And their opinion is hard to ignore—they would be the subjects answering the questions in that traditional research method approach.

PR in prison projects are not limited to the United States. During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers from Queen's University Belfast partnered on PR in UK prisons with User Voice, an organized led and staffed by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system (McNaull et al., 2024; User Voice, 2022). The researchers and User Voice staff co-designed a six-module peer research training that was first delivered to ten paid staff members of User Voice who had lived experience of the system. This group then developed a research design and instruments, trained 99 additional inside collaborators across 9 prisons, and worked with those inside collaborators to carry out the survey research at their own institutions. Nearly 1,500 surveys were collected at a time when all other traditional prison research was at a standstill, and findings and solutions were co-designed and communicated back through inside researchers on the ground. The end result was an unprecedented report

on coping during extreme confinement that documented "one of the darkest and most hidden results of the pandemic" (User Voice, 2022:6).

All of these efforts support an 'equitable epistemology' where what we collectively know is created through academic inquiry *and* personal lived experience (Harriott et al., 2024; Wright, 2024). In comparison, the knowledge inequity created by traditional academic inquiry is implied to produce an understanding of prison life that is incomplete. To date, however, there exists little empirical research that examines the assumptions of different knowledge production or increased trustworthiness between researchers and subjects when including incarcerated people as co-researchers. The counterfactual of what happens when inside researchers ask questions of other incarcerated people as compared to a traditional research approach has not been assessed. There is reason to expect support both in favor of and against the idea that inside researchers would produce different knowledge and would impact trustworthiness.

Different knowledge assumption

A rich theoretical and empirical foundation in social science research suggests that it does indeed matter who is asking the questions in prison research. Someone who walks in *their* shoes, speaks *their* language, and hears *their* voices may produce different knowledge than someone who has not. People seek out and connect better with others who share their sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001). This homophily principle translates into research methodology, where interviewer effects are present such that sociodemographic matching with the respondent impacts that respondent's answers (West & Blom, 2017). People in prison—distinguished from outsiders in both uniform and their inability to leave—occupy a unique identity characterized by misconception and stigma. 'Prisoner' is undoubtedly the master status for people on the inside and it is unlikely this defining identity is matched in an interviewer. Prisoners and their setting are so unique in research that they occupy status as a protected population. It could be expected that a fellow member of that protected population would produce different research responses than someone who is not.

In contrast, the unique positioning of inside researchers may not produce knowledge that is any different than an outside researcher. Social scientists go through significant education and training in order to capably establish rapport with interview subjects. IRBs are in place to ensure that no harm is done to prisoners and that they fully understand any risks and benefits to their participation. In contrast to the covert (and sometimes overt) experimentation on prisoners of the past, much of modern prison research extends a critical lens to the damaging impacts of mass incarceration on people, families, and communities (Beckett & Goldberg, 2022; Haney, 2012; Kreager & Kruttschnitt, 2018). Prison represents a total institution (Goffman, 1961), a defining and domineering presence with an impact on human behavior so stark that it may not matter who is asking the questions (Crewe & Ievins, 2019). But prison also represents a 'porous institution' (Ellis, 2021), one where outsiders such as staff, family members, volunteers—and researchers—come and go into facilities each day. People on the inside are often eager to participate in traditional interview research to share their experiences and to have their voice heard by these outsiders (Copes et al.,

2012). The different knowledge assumption may not hold: outside researchers might produce the same research responses as inside researchers.

Trustworthiness assumption

Outside researchers may be viewed by insiders with considerable suspicion given the power imbalances between them (Toch, 1967). Upon taking the perspective of someone incarcerated, it is difficult to imagine trusting someone from the outside to act in your own best interests with your information. People on the inside already answer a battery of questions for correctional and behavioral, physical, and mental health staff members on risk assessments and other administrative and institutional instruments; consent scripts do not precede these questions. Outside researchers by default need to cooperate and collaborate with correctional administrators and staff to gain and maintain access for research. People on the inside may therefore perceive outside researchers as aligned with staff, where "secondhand carcerality" may mean that well-intentioned researchers take on status as someone in power over people on the inside (Ellis, 2023). Prison is punishing, and so it would make sense for people on the inside to be suspicious of the intentions of outsiders who willingly spend some of their free time in prison. Confusing language within university- and IRB-speak likely does little to lessen these suspicions. And while the research itself might not be harmful, there might be harm—among other people incarcerated or staff—for having *participated* in research. For these reasons and more, prisoner research subjects could be reticent and guarded with outsiders asking them questions. Fellow inside interviewers, however, would not have to contend with most of these challenges in building trust and rapport, and they therefore may be viewed by their peers as more trustworthy.

In contrast, there may not be a collective identity representing 'we,' 'us,' and 'our' among people who are incarcerated, and they therefore may not be any more trusted than someone from the outside. Losing credibility as someone who can be trusted is one of the most salient pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). 'Do your own time' is a foundational principle of the convict code for incarcerated men and not trusting others is viewed as a form of strategic survival (Mitchell et al., 2021; cf. Young et al., 2023). Incarcerated women do their time together, but with community comes significant feelings of mistrust and suspicion—including questioning the motives of others who appear too friendly or supportive (Greer, 2000; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000). Young and Haynie's (2020) research examining trust among 103 incarcerated women in Pennsylvania documented these complexities. On average, incarcerated women only trusted 3% of other women on their unit, but they also reported nearly 4 people, on average, that they did trust on that unit. Importantly, this was a *good behavior unit*, where the women were misconduct-free prior to and during their stay. Even among a group selected for following prison rules and social expectations within those rules, trust was hard-earned and limited to a select few others with whom the women spent most of their time. Trust is the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to others. Divulging personal information to inside researchers could put incarcerated subjects

at risk for coercion, manipulation, and victimization in ways that would not occur with outside researchers.

Current study

PR approaches promise to bring people closest to the problem alongside scholars for the creation of solutions that are relevant and actionable. The value of empowering incarcerated co-researchers for the refinement or advancement of correctional knowledge rests on several untested assumptions. These assumptions have strong rationales both in support of and against their validity, and whether they hold up to empirical scrutiny has significant implications for theory and practice.

If the different knowledge assumption is supported, then new lines of research could be explored to best understand the implications of this finding for existing knowledge. For example, would known commodities in prison research like the pains of imprisonment be replicated with inside researchers? And if not, which approach is more likely to produce valid responses and why? PR proponents and users would have empirical support for the idea that 'credible messengers' produce credible knowledge. If the different knowledge assumption is not supported, then PR with inside interviewers could be viewed as a reliable alternative, complement, or replacement for traditional research. PR proponents and users might point to additional benefits of the approach such as overcoming logistical barriers to prison research, but claims of different (and assumedly, more accurate) knowledge would be limited to anecdotal support.

If the trustworthiness assumption is supported, then the potential for intentional or unintentional exploitation through research could be lessened. Participation rates might increase, and hard-to-reach populations could be included when interview subjects are familiar and comfortable with the person asking the questions. Proponents and users of PR with inside interviewers would have empirical support for the idea that credible messengers reduce the potential for harm to a protected population. If the trustworthiness assumption is not supported, then it would call into question how credible the credible messengers are as inside researchers in prison research. This is especially the case if the inside researchers are perceived as *less* trustworthy than outside researchers. Proponents and users of PR would have to use the approach with caution and navigate the very real potential for it to create harm within a confined population.

Data and method

Data were collected using a PR approach in which a team of outside and inside interviewers conducted interviews with participants. This study was conducted within a women's prison in Arizona, where a longstanding university–prison learning community had created the foundation for participatory research. The choice of setting therefore reflects both the practical realities of an established collaboration and the opportunity it provides to explore how trust and relational dynamics—central features

of women's imprisonment—shape participatory approaches in correctional research. The aim of the larger project was to identify opportunities to enhance the prison environment by examining incarcerated women's perceptions of the positive aspects of their experiences. These interviews were originally part of a broader qualitative study focused on understanding trust, relationships, and well-being among women in prison. The research team designed the project to specifically examine interviewer effects within this larger context.

The outside interviewers consisted of three female graduate students studying criminology and criminal justice. Each student had prior experience within correctional facilities and was comfortable communicating with correctional staff and incarcerated women. The inside interviewers consisted of eight incarcerated women who had been participating as part of a learning community alongside university faculty and graduate students. Four of those women were selected for that opportunity based on exemplary performance in a university class and they then nominated an additional four of their peers to join the group. The eight women had significant incarceration histories and experiences with significant amounts of time still to serve, including three serving life sentences. The inside interviewers were involved throughout the broader research process—from helping to refine interview questions and pilot test instruments to interpreting themes emerging from the interviews. They did not participate in formal data analyses but contributed substantively to sense-making and interpretation of results.

Before beginning data collection, both the inside and outside interviewers were trained by university faculty in interviewing protocols and ethics. Both sets of interviewers were also certified in IRB research codes of ethics. For the inside interviewers, this involved printing out IRB materials and testing elements to ensure the women understood the ethical principles of conducting research with a vulnerable population. All study protocols were reviewed and approved by university IRB, which included elements to protect the inside interviewers (e.g., written and signed statements from interviewers attesting they had not been coerced into their interviewer role).

Data were collected from 158 women in October 2021 in a single unit at the Arizona State Prison Complex at Perryville. The prison is the only complex for women in Arizona and at the time of study had a population of approximately 4,000 individuals distributed across 5 units on the complex. Respondent demographics are shown in Table 1.[3] The sample was recruited through flyers sent out on the incarcerated women's tablets and posted in public spaces throughout the unit. The team of inside interviewers further recruited participants by approaching other women on the unit to explain the purpose of the study and invite them to participate. After each interview, the outside researchers also invited participants to recruit others on the unit who may be interested in participating in the study.

[3] The full project interviewed 200 total women. Of the 200 interviewees, 158 (79%) met the condition of randomization. The 42 (21%) cases that were not designated as "randomized" were women who were unavailable due to their work assignment during weekday hours when outsider interviewers were onsite. Randomized and non-randomized participants did not significantly differ on demographic variables and fixed-choice questions (see Appendix 1).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Full sample (n=200)		Analytic sample (n=158)		Non-randomized cases (n=42)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	40.9	11.64	40.44	11.73	42.83	11.25
Age (logged)	3.67	0.28	3.66	0.28	3.72	0.27
Interviewer (Inside = 1)	0.50	0.50	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.51
Randomized (Random = 1)	0.79	0.41	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
White	0.44	0.50	0.42	0.50	0.5	0.51
Black	0.04	0.21	0.05	0.22	0.02	0.15
Hispanic	0.29	0.45	0.30	0.46	0.24	0.43
Years of Education	3.46	1.14	3.51	1.17	3.29	1.04
Single	0.50	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.60	0.50
Has Children	0.84	0.36	0.86	0.35	0.79	0.42
First Time in Prison	0.58	0.49	0.59	0.49	0.52	0.51
Time In Prison	5.85	6.07	5.50	6.27	7.16	5.10
Sentence Length	6.89	5.85	6.66	6.11	7.75	4.73
Lifer	0.03	0.17	0.03	0.16	0.05	0.22
Trust Items						
T1	0.70	0.46	0.72	0.45	0.62	0.49
T2	0.76	0.43	0.77	0.42	0.74	0.45
T3	0.68	0.47	0.70	0.46	0.60	0.50
T4	0.70	0.46	0.75	0.43	0.48	0.51
T5	0.14	0.35	0.15	0.36	0.12	0.33
T6	0.78	0.42	0.77	0.42	0.83	0.38
T7	0.80	0.40	0.82	0.39	0.76	0.43
T8	0.57	0.50	0.58	0.50	0.55	0.50
T9	0.66	0.48	0.65	0.48	0.69	0.47
T10	0.73	0.45	0.73	0.45	0.74	0.45
T11	0.67	0.47	0.68	0.47	0.64	0.48
T12	0.73	0.45	0.73	0.44	0.71	0.46
T13	0.64	0.48	0.63	0.49	0.71	0.46
T14	0.98	0.14	0.99	0.11	0.95	0.22
T15	0.93	0.26	0.94	0.24	0.90	0.30
Relational Health Items						
RH1	2.87	1.20	2.91	1.19	2.71	1.25
RH2	3.11	1.07	3.04	1.08	3.36	1.03
RH3	3.50	1.12	3.46	1.13	3.64	1.08
RH4	2.89	1.09	2.88	1.07	2.93	1.16
RH5	2.88	1.24	2.82	1.21	3.07	1.35
RH6	2.96	1.02	2.95	0.98	2.98	1.18
RH7	3.05	1.41	3.03	1.38	3.12	1.53
RH8	3.70	0.96	3.66	0.98	3.88	0.89
RH9	1.43	0.69	1.45	0.72	1.36	0.58
RH10	1.89	0.98	1.92	0.97	1.76	1.01
RH11	3.07	1.15	3.13	1.11	2.83	1.29
RH12	2.76	1.12	2.75	1.08	2.79	1.28
RH13	2.52	1.29	2.53	1.28	2.50	1.35

Table 1 (continued)

	Full sample (*n*=200)		Analytic sample (*n*=158)		Non-randomized cases (*n*=42)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
RH14	3.29	1.06	3.22	1.03	3.55	1.17
Psychological Safety Items						
PS1	2.69	1.09	2.75	1.04	2.50	1.25
PS2	3.68	1.22	3.61	1.21	3.95	1.23
PS3	2.56	1.04	2.62	1.04	2.33	1.05
PS4	2.86	1.12	2.89	1.06	2.71	1.33
PS5	2.18	1.00	2.18	1.00	2.17	1.01
PS6	3.48	1.08	3.44	1.08	3.64	1.10
PS7	3.54	1.12	3.48	1.10	3.74	1.17

Respondents were randomly assigned to an inside interviewer or an outside interviewer by taking the list of volunteers and using a coin flip to determine their assigned interviewer. Interviews were conducted in a private room on the unit, offered in both English and Spanish, and took approximately 45 min each to complete. All interviews were conducted in a large classroom located in a main area of the prison unit. The size of the classroom meant that there was enough space to spread out and conduct the interviews with reasonable privacy. There were up to four separate interviews being conducted at any given time in the classroom, but the inside and outside researchers were never interviewing at the same time. There were no correctional staff present in the room at the time of interviews for either set of interviewers. At the start of the interview, participants gave verbal consent, which is consistent with past recommendations for research in prison for verbal rather than written consent as it is less of a risk to the incarcerated participants (Moore & Wahidin, 2016).

Variables

Demographics We include measures of whether the respondent was interviewed by an inside interviewer or an outside interviewer, their age (logged), race/ethnicity, years of education, whether the respondent was single, whether they have any children, whether it is their first time in prison, how many years they have been in prison, and whether they have a life sentence.

Trust A set of 15 items that systematically measures respondents' knowledge of trust was created. Women were asked: "I would like you to think about what it means to trust other women in this unit. Next to each item below, please indicate whether the statement is true (T) or false (F) regarding the meaning of trust on this unit." These items had the response categories "True" or "False," as opposed to the usual "strongly agree/disagree" options, as the goal was to measure the truthfulness of the statement in terms of what trust means in the setting (not whether the individual agrees in an evaluative sense). These items are an example of "consensus data,"

which are designed to measure shared cultural knowledge among a set of individuals in a setting (see Weller & Romney, 1988 for a review).

Community relational health A set of 14 items measuring growth-fostering relationships was developed by adapting the community relational health scale developed by Liang et al. (2002). The community relational health scale captures the extent to which women feel that their unit can be described as having the four components of growth-fostering relationships: mutual engagement, authenticity, empowerment, and the ability to deal with conflict. Women were asked to "indicate the number that best applies to your relationship with or involvement with other women in this unit" where the response categories ranged from "Never" (1) to "Always" (5). The alpha reliability was 0.86.

Psychological safety A set of 4 items measuring psychological safety was developed by adapting the scale developed by Edmondson (2018). Psychological safety is the belief that a particular setting provides a safe space for interpersonal risk-taking. In Edmondson's work, this space involves a team, and psychologically safe spaces are those where individuals feel comfortable communicating private information, asking for help, or sharing new ideas without fear of negative reprisals. Group programming for incarcerated women involves similar risks. Women were asked to "indicate your agreement regarding interactions among women in programming" and the response categories varied from "Never" (1) to "Always" (5). Examples of items are "You can't share personal information in programming because people will gossip" (reverse coded), "In programs, it is easy to speak up about what is on your mind," and "People in this unit are usually comfortable talking about problems and disagreements." The alpha reliability was 0.70.

Appreciative inquiry We examine open-ended responses for seven questions asking respondents about their experiences in prison. These items were: "Tell me something about yourself or your life you feel proud of," "What is the most rewarding experience you have had since coming to this prison?", "What is the difference between an ordinary day and a great day in here?", "Tell me a story about a time when you were at your best in here in the last couple of weeks," "What positive skills do you have that have helped yourself or other people while you've been here?", "What is your favorite way to pass your time in here and why?", and "Tell me about your best experience with a member of staff in this prison."[4]

Using Atlas.ti software, two graduate student coders followed an inductive approach to coding the open-response questions based on characteristics of the data rather than a predefined theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Each coder began the process by familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated readings of all 200 responses. Each coder then independently open-coded the initial 20% ($n=40$) of responses by applying semantic codes to either portions of or the entirety of each response. From here, the coders then met to discuss their coding decisions

[4] Themes identified for each question are listed in Appendix 2.

and to establish an initial coding scheme. Each coder then recoded the same set of responses using the established coding scheme. Intercoder agreement was calculated at above 85% and the remaining conflicting coding decisions were negotiated between the coders until 100% agreement was reached. This coding served as the final coding of the first 20% of responses. These procedures were used to establish intercoder reliability and alignment in approach before proceeding to independent coding. The remaining 80% of responses were then split equally between the two coders for independent coding using the same coding scheme.

Once coding was complete, the coders then met to place the individual codes into "code groups" in Atlas.ti based on similarities in meaning and implications. These code groups ultimately represented the major themes and the individual codes as subthemes. After this, a finalized codebook was created that included the names, definitions, and examples of all individual codes as well as major themes. This process follows the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analyses. Major themes and subthemes were analyzed for the frequency at which they emerge among the 200 responses. This full two-coder process was applied to two of the seven open-response questions—"Tell me a story about a time when you were at your best in here in the last couple of weeks" and "Tell me about your best experience with a member of staff in this prison." These two questions were selected to represent distinct thematic domains within the interview protocol and to ensure reliability and consistency across coders before proceeding with the remainder.

Once confidence and consistency in the coding process were established among coders, the remaining five questions were split between the two coders and coded independently. The independent coding process followed a similar strategy to the two-coder approach. Each coder followed an inductive approach to coding the first 20% ($n = 40$) of responses. The codes established from the first 20% of responses then acted as the coding scheme for the remainder of responses. If additional codes were identified in the remaining 80% of responses that had not appeared initially, they were added to the codebook along with their definitions. Once coding was complete, the coder then placed individual codes into "code groups" in the Atlas.ti software. The coder then finalized the codebook, defining all individual codes (subthemes) and code groups (major themes).

Critically, although we believe that we have taken a rigorous and justified approach to coding themes, we are less interested in the actual themes derived and more interested in whether these themes differ across interviewer type. Thus, any concerns with our approach would need to be systematically applied to only one set of interviews in order for it to impact our research questions of interest. Importantly, the dataset provided to coders contained only the open-ended appreciative inquiry questions, and interviewer type (i.e., inside or outside) was not disclosed during the thematic coding process.

Comfort with interviewer To examine respondent's beliefs about the counterfactual scenario of their interviewer, respondents were asked: "Would you have been more comfortable completing this interview with [someone incarcerated at this unit or a university researcher]?" and as a follow up, "Why is that?" If the respondent was interviewed by an outside interviewer, then they were asked whether they would have

been more comfortable completing the interview with someone incarcerated on the unit. Alternatively, if the respondent was interviewed by an inside interviewer, they were asked whether they would have been more comfortable completing the interview with a university researcher. Each response was open-ended allowing analysis of the reasoning as to why a respondent was (or was not) comfortable with their assigned interviewer. The intent of these questions was to determine the comfort level and trustworthiness of their interviewer as compared to the alternate interviewer option. These responses were coded as "would not prefer alternate interviewer," "no preference," and "would prefer alternate interviewer."

Analytic approach

We perform three series of analyses.[5] In the first stage, we examine covariate balance to determine whether there is random assignment based on the observed demographic variables. For this analysis we use difference of means/proportion tests.

In the second stage, we examine whether differential responses were given to fixed-choice variables (i.e., trust, community relational health, and psychological safety) and open-response variables (i.e., appreciative inquiry) based on who interviewed the respondent. Our test of the different knowledge assumption asks questions about a sensitive topic—trust in prison—given research demonstrating that emotional or sensitive topics are particularly susceptible to interviewer effects (West & Blom, 2017). We determine whether there is a significant association between interviewer type and responses to 15 True/False questions on trust in the prison unit and 14 Never – Always questions on relationships with other women in the unit. To examine the different knowledge assumption further, we compare thematic responses given to 7 appreciative inquiry questions regarding life on that prison unit across interviewer type (Liebling et al., 2001). These questions ask the women about their positive day-to-day experiences on the unit, including their best experiences with staff members, and their open-ended format allows for more variation in responses given to interviewers (as compared to simply true/false or Likert responses).

In the third stage, we examine the trustworthiness assumption using a chi-squared test to determine if there is a significant association between interviewer type and responses to the question "Would you have been more comfortable completing this interview with [someone incarcerated at this unit or a university researcher]?" We then explore this association further through a content analysis of the open-ended question that asks why respondents answered the way that they did.

Missing data

Items with missing values due to nonresponse were rare in the data. For the trust items, 51 (2.2%) of the 2,370 responses (i.e., 1,581 respondents × 15 items) were missing. These values were replaced with valid values (i.e., "true" or "false") by randomly sampling from a binomial distribution. For the community relational health

[5] All code to reproduce analyses and outputs are available at: [link excluded for anonymity].

items, 10 (0.4%) of the 2,212 (i.e. 158 respondents x 14 items) were missing. These values were replaced with valid values (i.e., 1 through 5) by randomly sampling from a uniform distribution. For the psychological safety items, 28 (2.5%) of the 1,106 (i.e. 158 respondents x 7 items) were missing. These values were also replaced with valid values (i.e., 1 through 5) by randomly sampling from a uniform distribution. This procedure for replacing missing values simulates the scenario where individuals with missing values "guessed" randomly from the available response set.

Results

Balance

Figure 1 plots the coefficients for the difference of means/proportions tests examining balance on covariates for the 158 respondents who were randomly assigned to an inside interviewer vs. an outside interviewer. Eighty (51%) respondents were

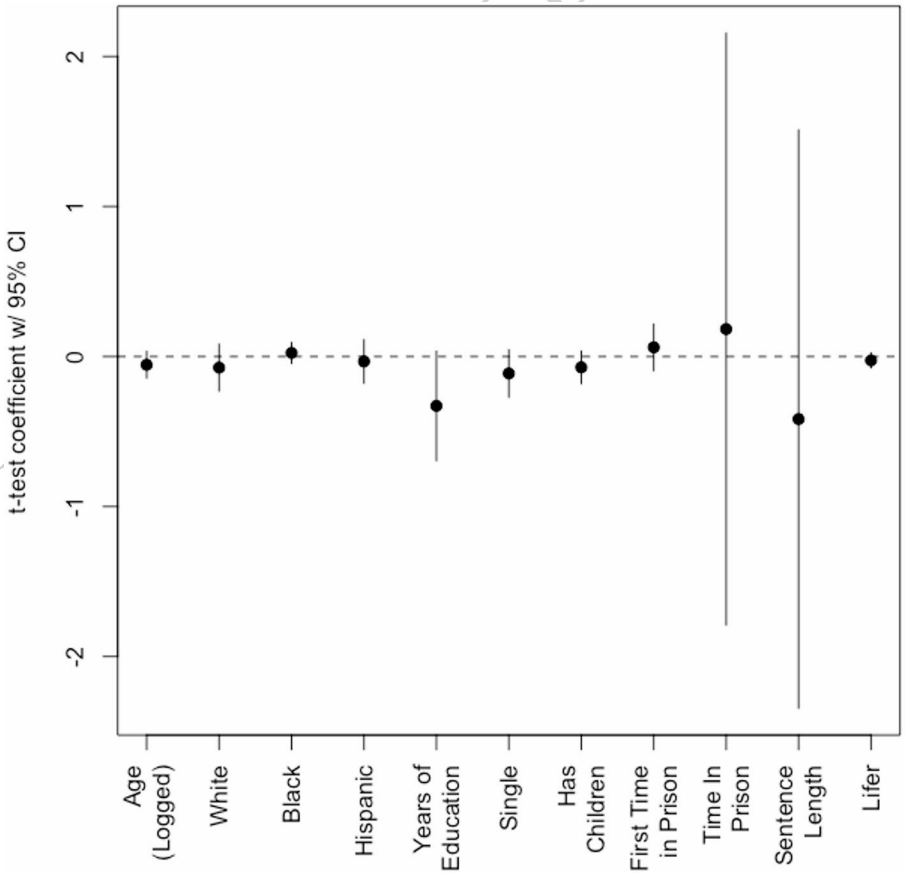

Fig. 1 Balance among randomized interviewees ($n = 158$)

interviewed by an outside interviewer and 78 (49%) were interviewed by an inside interviewer. As shown in the figure, none of the tests are significantly different from zero indicating that there are no substantive differences between respondents based on their assignment.

Different knowledge assumption

Fixed-choice responses Figure 2 plots the coefficients for the difference of means/proportions for the fixed-choice questions (i.e. trust, community relational health, and psychological safety). The point estimates represent differences between those interviewed by outside versus an inside interviewer for each item and the line segments represent the 95% confidence intervals. As the plot shows, there are no significant difference of means for any of the items based on the randomization condition. The figure also shows that there is substantial variation within each group (as indicated by the length of the line segments) for many of the items.

Open-ended responses The results for the open-ended responses (i.e. appreciative inquiry items) are shown in Fig. 3. The figure displays barbell plots showing the proportion of each group (i.e. outside interviewer and inside interviewer) represented in each theme (see Appendix 2 for themes). Wider barbells indicate larger differences in the proportion of each theme across the groups. For each theme, chi-squared

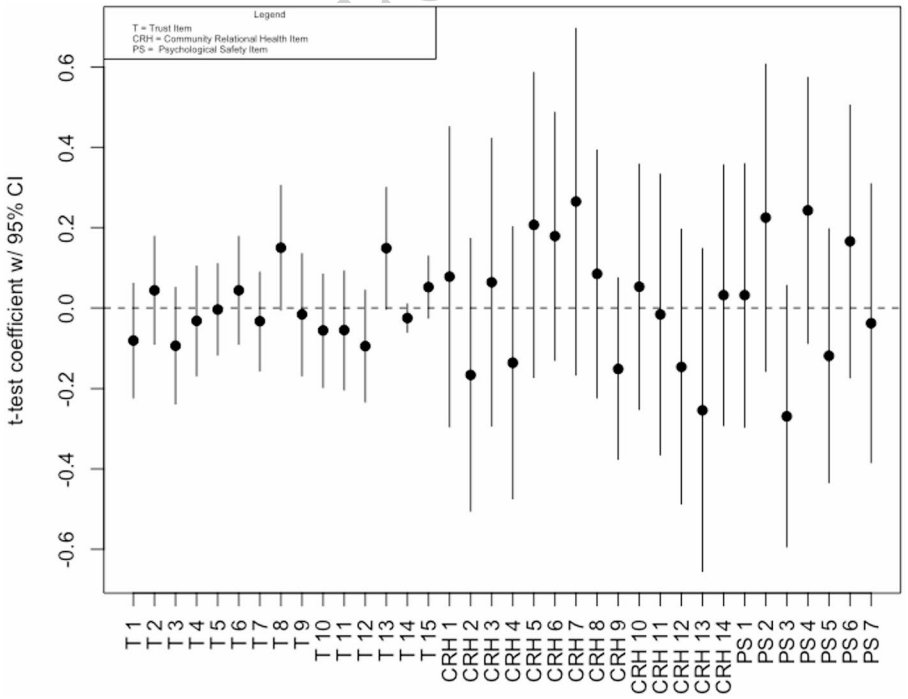

Fig. 2 Difference of Means among Randomized Interviewees ($n = 158$). Note: point estimates represent value of t-tests and segments represent 95% confidence intervals

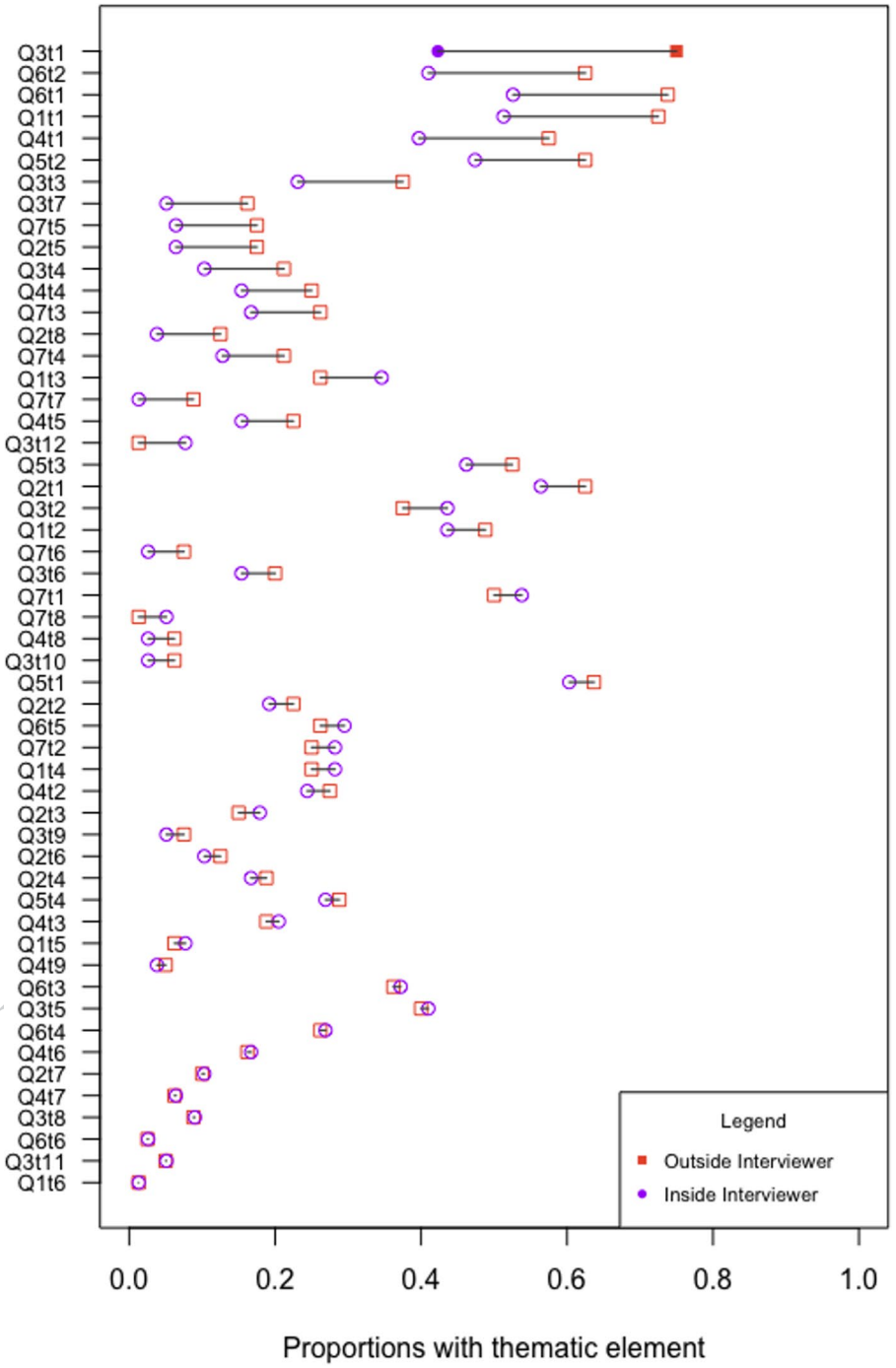

Fig. 3 Proportions for themes and differences

tests are performed to determine whether a particular thematic element was more likely among those interviewed by outside versus an inside interviewer. In this plot, the themes are ordered by the largest differences between groups. Themes that are significantly different are color-filled, whereas those that are not color-filled are not significantly different. Since we are conducting 53 tests, there is an increased risk of Type I errors, where some significant results may occur by chance rather than reflecting true effects. To account for this, we use a Bonferroni correction, which reduces the likelihood of false positives (Dunn, 1961) and results in a corrected significance level of 0.001. Out of all the tests ($n = 53$), there was only 1 thematic element that was significantly different from zero at the Bonferroni corrected level of 0.001. The only thematic element that was significantly different was for the question "What is the difference between an ordinary day and a great day in here?". 75% of the women who had an outside interviewer reported the theme "Great Day: Positive Environment & Tolerable Conditions" whereas only 42.3% of women who had an inside interviewer reported this theme. Without the Bonferroni correction, five additional themes are significantly different across interviewer type. We present these uncorrected comparisons for descriptive purposes only and to illustrate potential areas of difference, keeping in mind that only 1 thematic element was significantly different from zero. For the above ordinary day question, outside interviewers were also more likely to elicit a 'calm environment' theme (16% to 5%). For the prompt "Tell me something about yourself or your life that you are proud of," outside interviewers were more likely to elicit a theme of personal growth and resilience (72% to 51%). Similarly, for the prompt "Tell me about a time you were at your best in here in the last couple of weeks," outside interviewers were more likely to elicit a theme of personal growth (58% to 40%). Last, for the prompt "What is your favorite way to pass your time in here and why?" outside interviewers were more likely to elicit themes of self-betterment and productivity (74% to 53%) and leisure and creativity (62% to 41%). Taken as a whole, though, these findings indicate that women did not talk about their responses differently based on who conducted the interview.[6]

Trustworthiness assumption

Table 2 reports the cross-tabulation for the interviewer type and the comfort variables. Table 2 shows the proportions for responses to the question "Would you have been more comfortable completing this interview with [someone incarcerated at this unit or a university researcher]?" conditional on the type of interviewer. There are two main findings from the table. First, the majority of women in both groups indicated that they would *not* prefer the alternate interviewer (83%). In other words, when asked whether they would have been more comfortable with the alternative interviewer condition, most women said "no." Second, there is a statistically significant difference based on who did the interview. Women who had an outside inter-

[6] Given that we have 158 cases, we examined whether we have sufficient power to detect effects. We have a power level of 0.80 for a Cohen's (1988) *w* effect size of 0.33 (a medium effect size) using our Bonferroni corrected significance level. Given that we have sufficient power for a medium effect, we are confident our study results are not a result of Type II errors.

Table 2 Proportions for coded responses for S4Q12 variable: "Would you have been more comfortable completing this interview with [someone incarcerated at this unit or a university researcher]?" ($n=158$)

	Outside Interviewer ($n=80$)	Inside Interviewer ($n=78$)	All
Would **not** prefer alternate interviewer	93% (74)	73% (57)	83% (131)
No preference	6% (5)	23% (18)	15% (23)
Would prefer alternate interviewer	1% (1)	4% (3)	2% (4)

Chi-squared test = 10.53 significant at the $p<0.01$ level. When the last row is excluded (due to low cell counts), the chi-squared test is = 8.11 and significant at the $p<0.01$ level

viewer were *more* likely to say they would not prefer an alternate interviewer (93%) compared to women who received an inside interviewer (73%).

To add more context to these differences, we examine the responses to a question that asked respondents why they answered the way that they did. For those women assigned to an outside interviewer, women who were categorized as "would not prefer alternative interviewer" generally framed their response based on two separate issues. First, most women emphasized trust and sharing personal information. Example responses include "No one is really to be trusted," "they are not legitimate. They will share the information and antagonize," and "Don't 100% trust people in orange." Second, women emphasized that they felt more comfortable with outside researchers because of the ease of talking with them. For example, "Easier to talk to people who aren't incarcerated" and "comfortable with someone in the outside world." Respondents who were interviewed by an outside interviewer indicated they would not prefer an inside interviewer mainly because of concerns about trust. The single respondent who indicated that they "would prefer alternate interviewer," stated: "Because it would have been better."

For those women assigned to an inside interviewer, responses generally emphasized the unique connection with someone who is incarcerated and how it would be difficult for an outsider to understand. For example, "Because they don't know how it is being in here," "Because my peer would understand me better," and "more comfortable with someone in orange that can relate." The three respondents who indicated that they "would prefer alternate interviewer," stated: "more open and comfortable sharing information," "Sometimes it can be hard to talk to another inmate (generally)," and "Because a person that is here will let other people know your business and with [university name] it's more private." These responses echo the emphasis on trust and comfort with interviewer.

Discussion

The inside knowledge of people in prison combined with the outside knowledge of scholars presents a more holistic approach to the study of prison life. In her 2025 Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) Presidential Address, Kim (2025) spoke of operationalizing the ACJS mission through a strategic pathway of inclu-

sion through epistemological openness and methodological pluralism (see also Faith Lutze's ACJS Presidential Address, Lutze, 2021). Kim (2025:7) advocates for "transdisciplinary translation: the integration of scholarly knowledge, professional expertise, and community insight to co-produce contextually grounded, actionable solutions." In this spirit, a forthcoming handbook presents sixty chapters around the theme of "Lived Experience in the Justice System" (Dum, 2025), including incarcerated (e.g., Klemm et al., 2025; Mills et al., 2025) and formerly incarcerated (e.g., Garlock et al., 2025; Huynh et al., 2025) collaborators writing alongside criminologists. This inclusion of people with lived experience extends to the research process where PR approaches have lived experience experts working alongside scholars. Importantly, including people incarcerated in the research process can lead to implications for practice that are perceived to be more accurate, credible, and useful. Farrell and colleagues (2021:11) conclude their review on PR in prisons, "If researchers do not incorporate the voices of people in prison and their ideas for alternatives, prisons will remain closed and impenetrable to change."

Lived experience inclusion extends beyond prison research. Credible messengers, for example, are people who have undergone a transformation to become a community agent of change for others who share similar backgrounds, personal experiences, and contact with various social and legal systems (Martinez, 2022). PR approaches have included a variety of communities such as youth with disabilities, police officers, LGBTQ communities, homeless populations, and substance users, and PR approaches are especially associated with public health research (Collins, 2018). Street participatory action research represents an "epistemological orientation" (Payne & Brown, 2021: 170) where people with experience in both the streets and the justice system are trained as researchers. Their insider knowledge of the community and the population equips them to elicit and interpret responses in ways that outsiders cannot. PR approaches that employ lived experience interviewers are assumed to produce different information than what would be produced by outside interviewers. Lived experience interviewers are also assumed to be more trusted as compared to outside interviewers. These assumptions are especially held with research on protected or hard-to-reach populations, to include people in prison, but also people in the streets engaged in illegal behaviors. We set out to build on the limited empirical evidence of these assumptions, and our work here can guide future iterations of PR work with various populations.

First, we find few instances in which different knowledge is produced across type of interviewer. This pattern persists across different types of responses including fixed-choice (e.g., True/False) and open-ended responses that allowed incarcerated women to divulge more information. Further, we observe few differences across the content of questioning—from seemingly innocuous questions on how to pass the time in prison to more intense questions related to trust among people incarcerated, interactions with staff members, and perceptions of conditions of confinement. For example, incarcerated women responded similarly to the sensitive prompt "There is a lot of backbiting and gossiping among women on this unit" no matter if they were talking to an outside researcher or a fellow incarcerated woman from that unit. The assumption that inside interviewers would produce different knowledge as compared

to outside interviewers was not supported in our randomized experiment among 158 incarcerated women in Arizona.

The few differences that we did observe, however, are instructive for work moving forward that seeks to better understand the value of including lived experience in the research process. The lone significant difference in response across interviewer type emerged for the question "What is the difference between an ordinary day and a great day in here?" Outside interviewers were more likely to elicit a response where a great day was marked by a positive environment and tolerable conditions (75%) as compared to inside interviewers (42%). One possible interpretation of this finding is that incarcerated women are more likely to call attention to *intolerable* conditions of confinement with outside interviewers as compared to inside interviewers. When adding findings without the Bonferroni correction, the responses suggest outside interviewers were more likely to elicit thematic responses around growth and personal achievement as compared to inside interviewers. This pattern could suggest social desirability when portraying oneself to outsiders or it could suggest reticence when portraying oneself to insiders.

Second, we find differences in comfort level and implied trustworthiness across interviewer type. Specifically, women who were interviewed by an outside interviewer were more likely to *not* prefer an inside interviewer whereas women who were interviewed by an inside interviewer were more ambivalent toward whom interviewed them. There are many potential interpretations of this finding. Incarcerated women may experience discomfort in essentially telling someone they may see tomorrow that they would rather have talked to someone else. Or, incarcerated women who went through the unfamiliar process of completing a research project with an inside (peer) interviewer may decide the experience was not so bad. Most troubling, however, and an interpretation that is supported by our open-ended follow-up question, is that incarcerated women are concerned with what fellow incarcerated women might do with the information from their responses. From perceived lack of legitimacy and lack of trust to an outward concern that information will be shared in a manipulative manner, women on the inside expressed doubt that inside interviewers could capably carry out research. Further, while it is difficult to directly tell someone you would have actually preferred talking to someone else, three incarcerated women told their peers exactly that, with their reasoning having to do with comfort level and trust. The assumption that inside interviewers would be perceived as more trustworthy as compared to outside interviewers was not supported and we find some evidence that they may actually be perceived as less trustworthy.

Implications for future research and policy

Our work suggests that including inside interviewers in research could serve as a reliable alternative, complement, or replacement for traditional research. Our inside interviewers were just as capable in carrying out interview research as were our university researchers. Thought differently, though, our outside interviewers were just as capable as the lived experience experts who are assumed to be closest to both the problems and the solutions. This means that scholars can share ownership of knowledge with the people who live it. PR approaches can center voices of people

with lived experience—without sacrificing scholarly rigor—in a more equitable epistemology. Our findings further suggest that insider research does not remove bias but rather redistributes it, as both insider and outsider interviewers appear to shape responses in distinct yet comparable ways.

Building on this, these findings point to important ethical considerations and the potential for harm when including inside interviewers in research. Not everyone lives experience the same—that is what makes it *their* lived experience. A call for 'nothing about us without us' may unintentionally create an 'us' that masks critical individual differences in perspective and experience. Convict criminologists have long recognized that serving time does not reduce people to some universal truth about prison (Ross, 2024). In our work, we see evidence that some incarcerated women may be distrustful of other women who are incarcerated in ways that are unique from distrust of outside interviewers. Future PR efforts in prison should be used with caution while considering the potential for harm based on the content of research (Fine, 2013; McNaull et al., 2024). PR should not be employed solely to replace traditional methods to overcome logistical barriers of prison research. It may be the case that *formerly* incarcerated interviewers are better suited to carry out interviews, which could still retain the knowledge equity of lived experience. Or that incarcerated co-researchers could participate in all phases of the process except for the interview stage (e.g., Rell et al., 2024; TenNapel et al., 2024). A particularly empowering approach could be to allow participants to choose if they want an inside or outside interviewer. There is much to learn about the potential benefits and harms of lived experience in research when 'us' is disaggregated to allow for individual differences within and between incarcerated interviewers and subjects.

In addition, while our experimental design focused on interviewer identity rather than positionality, our findings invite reflection on how positionality—understood as the researcher's standpoint, experience, and relationship to participants—shapes both access and interpretation. Although we do not make claims about its relative importance, our results suggest that positionality may operate in more nuanced ways than is often assumed, warranting deeper exploration in future participatory research.

Taken together, we believe there is much to gain from pursuing a science of lived experience (see also Antojado & McPhee, 2024). In some ways, requiring empirical support of a lived experience approach as we have done here forces a traditional validation of knowledge upon a nontraditional way of knowing. Researchers could embrace alternative approaches in pursuit of knowledge equity as valuable in their own right and especially as measured against their own metrics for success (Martinez, 2022). At the same time, lived experience could be unpacked further to allow for the complexities inherent in grouping a mass of people based on one shared characteristic of identity—especially when some seek to shed that identity while others embrace it (see LeBel, 2025). A science of lived experience could bring the necessary precision and analytical rigor to move beyond arguments for the mere inclusion of lived experience to better understand the conditions under which it is most appropriate and beneficial.

Limitations

We believe that we have provided a significant step forward in understanding the nuance when including lived experience in research. Our study is not perfect nor definitive, and we have done our best to explore a first look on these issues in a challenging setting. Several limitations of our work could be improved upon in future studies.

First, our conclusions could be different if our sample were incarcerated men. The well-known dictum of 'do your own time' among incarcerated men suggests that they would not feel comfortable talking to an inside interviewer (cf. Thrasher et al., 2019). In contrast, women do their time together, and a corollary assumption could be that incarcerated women as 'insiders' would be more comfortable with inside interviewers as compared to incarcerated men (i.e., our results here would not be generalizable to men). These broad assumptions obscure significant complexity across and within gender when it comes to the incarceration experience. In Crewe and colleagues (2017) work on the gendered pains of imprisonment, for example, a sample of men and women serving long sentences identified the problems they experienced as a result of their incarceration. The most severe problems appeared consistently across both genders ("Missing somebody"; "Worrying about people outside"; "Having to follow other people's rules and orders"). However, unique to women, respondents identified "Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison" as the fourth highest problem, and women also uniquely identified "Wishing you had more privacy" as a problem. While these findings derive from a European context, they provide valuable theoretical insight into how gender structures experiences of confinement. Given the distinct organizational and cultural features of the U.S. correctional system, these findings should be viewed as conceptual points of comparison rather than direct empirical equivalents. In short, asking incarcerated women to trust other incarcerated women—and to talk *about trust* with those incarcerated women—is a particularly rigorous test of interviewer effects. Nonetheless, future research with a male sample could further our understanding of the complexities of the impact of lived experience in correctional research.

Relatedly, this study was situated within an established prison–university learning community, consistent with participatory research approaches that depend on structured collaboration and trust among participants. The inside interviewers were selected based on demonstrated engagement and reliability within that program. While these conditions are central to PR methodology and critical to conducting ethical and credible research in correctional settings (Haverkate et al., 2020), they may also limit the generalizability of findings to other correctional contexts. Differences in institutional culture, programming, and security practices across U.S. facilities could yield distinct dynamics of trust and participation, much as cross-national variations do. We note this as both a contextual feature of the study and a methodological necessity of PR designs, which rely on structured, collaborative environments to ensure ethical participation and high-quality data.

Second, we believe that outsider and insider status is the most visible and salient form of identity to potentially impact answers in prison research. Yet, we acknowledge that other attributes likely come into play that could impact responses, most

prominently gender, age, race or ethnicity, and personality. Outside interviewers in this study all identified as female and were graduate students in their 20's. Further, the university has a presence on this particular prison unit where students and faculty teach classes and lead workshops. Taken together, the same gender, general approachability as students looking to learn, and familiarity on the unit may have all contributed to less of a perceived divide between insiders and outsiders. It will be important for future research to account for similarities and differences between interviewers and subjects to determine the relative importance of incarceration status on response.

Third, we do see variation in responses to the open-ended comfort question and yet we were unable to explain why some women were more comfortable with inside interviewers. Some women very much preferred to be interviewed by a *specific* inside interviewer whom they knew and could trust. The implication here is that it matters *who* on the inside is asking the questions, which is another result in support of examining if there really is a uniform 'us' among people incarcerated. It does appear, therefore, that at least some women preferred to be interviewed by fellow incarcerated women whom they could trust, and future research could untangle the more complex question of *under what conditions* would people incarcerated prefer to be interviewed by an inside researcher.

Fourth, we acknowledge that an unstructured interview—where interviewers could decide what to ask, how to ask it, and how to follow up or probe on what they have asked—could allow for more variation in how outside and inside interviewers approach data collection. Here, we have held the questions constant between interviewer types to determine if participants responded differently to that question based on who was asking it. This is particularly relevant for the open-ended questions where they can choose how much to divulge to their interviewer. Both sets of interviewers were still obtaining consent, they were still establishing rapport, and they were still engaging in clarifying and providing additional information throughout the interview as needed. Previous research has suggested that more structured interviews like ours would indeed produce a different response with an incarcerated interviewer (Thrasher et al., 2019). Nonetheless, we hope this work provides a useful first step toward understanding the much more complex empirical situation where inside and outside interviewers may vary the questions that they ask on a particular topic.

Last, we acknowledge the difficulty in assessing comfort level in the trustworthiness assumption and we encourage alternative methods for determining levels of trust in future studies. Specifically, from a social desirability standpoint, it would be difficult to complete an interview with someone and at the end of the interview tell that person you wished you had spoken to someone else. Only 4 participants in our sample of 158 said they would have been more comfortable completing the interview with the other type of interviewer. While this may partly reflect the sensitivity of the question itself, we have no theoretical or empirical reason to expect that such discomfort was systematically greater among either interviewer type. Future research could assess this assumption separately from the interviewer, perhaps in a follow-up survey question that also provides additional context around the alternative option that could have been received.

Conclusion

Tucked away in Appendix A of *The Society of Captives*, Sykes (1958:135) wrote of "two serious methodological difficulties" in studying the prison. First, outsiders could be 'conned' by highly articulate, glib prisoners looking to secure some personal advantage. Second, outsiders could become partisan, either consciously or unconsciously, injecting bias into their interpretations of what they saw and what they heard. Either situation could produce a distorted picture of prison life. Our results suggest that our outside interviewers hear and interpret similar answers as compared to what our insider interviewers hear and interpret. Both sets of researchers could be part of an inclusive and equitable knowledge production for what we know about prison. Our results also suggest that pursuing additional avenues of research within a science of lived experience could contextualize this knowledge while informing upon potential harms of research. Sykes (1958) concluded Appendix A on methods by acknowledging the complexities of prison and the complexities of studying prison: "The realities of imprisonment are, however, multi-faceted; there is not a single true interpretation but many, and the meaning of any situation is always a complex of several, often conflicting viewpoints. This fact can actually be an aid to research concerning the prison rather than a hindrance…One learns not to look for the one, true version; instead, one becomes attuned to contradiction." While Sykes was writing here about the often-conflicting viewpoints of captors and captives, we believe that the contradictions and corroborations of knowledge obtained by inside and outside researchers can better approximate the complexities of prison life. Ross (2024:7), one of the co-founders of Convict Criminology, agrees, "Although difficult to balance, the perspectives of lived experiences and the approach of those who lack them can work synergistically to create stronger research, mentorship, and activism (including public policy)." What we think we know will be enriched when 'we' is inclusive of people with diverse ways of knowing.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-025-09710-8.

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