

Multi-Perspective Research on Foreigners in Prisons in Switzerland

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Telling someone about my research on foreigners in prisons usually provokes spontaneous emotional reactions: some people express the fears they would have of talking to criminals (mostly thought of being male) and admire the supposed courage of facing such a challenge. Others wonder whether they would stand talking to these poor persons incarcerated far from home – in these cases the inmates are mainly thought of being women. And some people are suspicious of the aim of the study because they suppose it must include showing sympathy towards offenders or, even worse, that the research aims at excusing foreign offenders and presenting them as victims. Many people however are simply fascinated and curious to know what a prison in Switzerland looks like, how inmates live, how they are treated by staff, how it feels to talk to them and to work in this very specific and mostly hidden context to outsiders. Before entering a prison for the first time, it was a mixture of these questions and attitudes I had in my mind, too. And all along the process of data gathering, transcribing and analysing these different aspects of curiosity, of positive and negative emotions, the ambiguity towards inmates and staff were present, although in steady evolution and change. However, I got accustomed to working behind bars and security fences quite quickly. Meanwhile, my colleagues and friends started to get used to my new working area as well and even began to like telling others with a smile that I was in prison when out of office.

No doubt, prisons are special places, with their own logic and rules and full of ambiguity – for inmates, staff and also researchers. And it is obvious that a series of methodological and ethical questions related to security, confidentiality, independence, trust and power have to be dealt with. This chapter aims at giving insight into a research project on foreign national inmates in two closed penitentiaries in Switzerland focusing on methodological aspects and their ethical and personal implications for the researchers. The focus on this special group of foreign inmates implied particular ethical and methodological concerns as these people often are

socially isolated and in precarious situations as far as their legal and/or socio-economic position is concerned. In order to grasp and understand the situation of foreign inmates and what their high share in Swiss prisons implies for the penal institutions and the responsible administrative services the project followed a multi-perspective approach. This way, all groups of actors involved (foreign inmates, prison staff, and administrative staff) were given the opportunity to express their point of view. Thus, a deep understanding of the diverse processes being under way was striven for. However, this approach entailed at the same time difficulties and caused dilemmas the research team had to deal with in the course of its work.

In the following, the multi-perspective approach to organisational settings in the migration context will be presented and its advantages and disadvantages will be reflected on. Second, the chapter will focus on the specific context of doing research in penal institutions in general and in particular on foreign national inmates, highlighting methodological aspects that turned out to be of particular use and pointing to ethical challenges.

Foreigners in closed prisons: background information

Before pointing out the methodological and ethical questions in this specific study the context in which this study took place will be sketched. Foreign national prisoners are increasing in numbers in most European countries (Tomaševski 1994, Van Kalmthout et al. 2007a, 2007b). With a share of 69% in 2006, Switzerland is among those European countries with the highest rates of foreign national inmates.¹ Despite an intense public debate on this high share and on so-called ‘foreigners’ criminality’, very little is known about the situation and background of foreign inmates or about the consequences of this trend for Swiss prisons.² This lack of reliable data led to a research project dealing with the situation of foreign inmates in two – in Swiss terminology – ‘closed prisons’.³ The main interest of this study was to know more about the imprisoned foreigners (who they are and how they experience doing time in Switzerland), to understand the reasons for this high share and to reflect on how staff of the penal institutions is dealing with the changing set up of prisons and how this affects the practice of the prison department and in particular the migration service.

‘Closed prisons’ are institutions originally intended for recidivist offenders with a medium to high level of security. Since by law foreign national convicts can be expelled after release because they are considered to be ‘unwanted’,⁴ the risk of escape is taken for granted and generally, these inmates are placed in closed prisons with highly restricted opportunities to leave. This leads to a clear overrepresentation of 70–80% foreign national inmates in this type of custody (Bundesamt für Statistik 2007).

For the same reason, also remand prisons show very high rates of foreign national inmates. On the contrary, when it comes to so-called 'open' prisons or alternative sanctions as Electronic Monitoring, Swiss prisoners are clearly in the majority.⁵

After serving their time, foreign nationals can be deported from Switzerland on the basis of their legal status as 'non-national' and depending on the seriousness of their offence. This means that when being sentenced for a criminal act, citizenship makes a difference. Hence, foreign national inmates find themselves in a situation of 'double exclusion' by both the penal law and by the foreign nationals act. This means that after being excluded temporarily from participating in everyday social life by incarceration, foreign national convicts run the risk of further being expelled from the Swiss territory and being forced to return to their country of origin. In contrast, Swiss citizens cannot be expelled from their home country since they are enjoying an unrestricted right of abode which is exclusively granted to them. Hence, the consequences of a criminal offence differ according to the legal status of the convict. Unlike the recently much debated topic of detention and deportation of undocumented migrants or rejected asylum seekers because of their 'illegal' stay, this study deals with foreign nationals who have been sentenced by a penal court in Switzerland and who have served their time in prison. Some of them are indeed undocumented migrants, but all of them – according to the court – have committed a crime. In some cases, 'illegal' stay was in fact one of several reasons for the sentence, but it was hardly ever the main reason for being incarcerated in one of the closed prisons. Furthermore, the penitentiaries talked about here needs to be distinguished from detention centres for irregular migrants. Not only are the latter exclusively intended for foreign nationals, they are also based on different legal grounds than penitentiaries (administrative foreign nationals act vs. penal code).

This study is interdisciplinary in the sense that it used an ethnographic approach in combination with a historical focus in two Swiss prisons and in the respective administrative units, i.e. the migration service and the prison department. The prisons of Hindelbank with a capacity for 107 female inmates and Thorberg with one for 165 male inmates are both located in the Canton of Bern. In 2004, the rate of foreign inmates was at 89% for men in Thorberg and at 50% for women in Hindelbank. Apart from the common characteristics of potential double exclusion the group of foreign prisoners in the Swiss penal system shows a great deal of diversity with regard to nationality, religion, socio-economic background, offences, etc. The presence of large groups of foreign inmates is not a new phenomenon in Swiss penitentiaries. In Thorberg Swiss inmates became a minority by the mid-1980s while in Hindelbank this happened ten years later. Despite many years of experience in dealing with an increasingly more heterogeneous group of inmates, the shifting composition of these

groups remains a major challenge for the prisons. Due to the fact that such changes as regards to characteristics and number of inmates can hardly be foretold, the management is left with a reduced room for manoeuvre in the anticipation of appropriate action. Diversity management as a basic strategy in coping with this situation is not widely adopted yet.⁶ One goal of the study was to understand the complex process of interaction between the prison service and the migration office in decision-making with regard to the expulsion of an inmate after release. For many of the inmates who later will be deported, this decision becomes final only towards the end of their stay in prison since a majority of foreign prisoners must leave Switzerland after release. As a result rehabilitation efforts during their stay tend to become neglected.⁷

Methodological approach: Multi-perspective research design

Ethical questions are omnipresent in qualitative research based on face-to-face interactions. This is even truer when studying migrants and their lives in a foreign country. One reason for this is the personal nature of interviewing, observing and participating in their lives. Much more than in rather anonymous and standardised interactions with interviewees or when working with administratively gathered data bases, in qualitative interviewing or participant observation researchers get involved as 'full persons' into interactions and a personal relationship to the researched persons is built up, albeit mostly only a temporary one. In this situation, a lot of questions arise that turn around topics like professionalism, distance and involvement, obligations towards the research partners etc. Working with migrants in precarious situations enhances the complexity of these aspects as very often there is considerable status difference between the researcher and the researched as far as legal status/ citizenship, socio-economic position and often also education are concerned. Choosing an appropriate methodological approach can contribute to reducing ethical tensions. A multi-perspective research design that aims at understanding a given phenomenon and the intertwining agency of a variety of actors can be one possibility. In the following such an approach will be presented and its potentials and difficulties discussed thereby drawing on experiences from two concrete studies. The first is an application for a research project on the naturalisation process in a Swiss city (Achermann & Gass 2003) and the second the already mentioned study on foreign national inmates in closed prisons where a similar design was used, however enlarged considerably in scope and complexity.

The idea of capturing a given social phenomenon in its broadest sense by taking into consideration the intertwining and mutually influencing

structural conditions and the agency of individuals in their varying appearances is typical for anthropological research. In classical anthropological studies a holistic view was mainly achieved by participant observation which was ideally done while spending a one year cycle in a community (e.g. Malinowski 1972). For migration research in organisational settings however, other methodological tools for attaining a broad, deep and multi-faceted view seem to be more practicable and adequate. Through triangulation of a variety of perspectives and of different kinds of data such a comprehensive understanding can be approached. Its advantages are twofold: On the one hand, the complexity of a given phenomenon is grasped by giving a voice and listening to all the (groups of) actors implied in a given setting. On the other hand, combining multiple types of data is thought to enhance understanding.

Such an approach can be situated in the Weberian tradition of sociology that is concerned 'with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences' (Weber 1968). Liebling (1999: 163) points to the fact that 'to understand and promote understanding' is a task of researchers and part of their work and that by only combining a variety of data, including emotions, 'a deep kind of knowledge that feels like understanding' can be achieved. However, such a multi-perspective approach dealing with diverse data should not be understood as a means for finding 'the truth' or 'the reality'. Instead of giving simple answers researchers will rather be confronted with the complexity of social life. Of course, different perspectives and data can and are thought to complement each other and thereby foster a comprehensive understanding of certain processes. Nevertheless, the outcome of triangulation will often not be one clear picture of composed parts of a puzzle that would correspond to 'the objective truth'. Researchers will rather face a multidimensional picture whose colours, shadings and clear, blur or black parts change according to the perspective from which it is presented or looked at. Far from striving for objective and absolute results, multi-perspective research rather aims at making visible, transparent and understandable the complex, manifold and sometimes contradictory processes of social life.

Outline of a multi-perspective research design

In the study on foreigners in two closed prisons in the Swiss Canton of Bern we opted for this methodological approach because the project aimed at a balanced and deep understanding of a complex subject that had not been investigated yet. It seemed important not to limit to partial views in order to overcome the numerous biases in the field of prisons and criminal foreigners. To illustrate how exactly such a multi-perspective research

could look like, the procedure of data collection will be presented on this example. In order to distinguish the different perspectives and types of data the description follows an analytical distinction between different research phases. However, in practice these stages always overlap and intermingle (cf. Table 3.1 for an overview).

Variety of perspectives

Two groups of actors take centre stage: the foreign inmates on the one side and members of staff on the other side.⁸ Together they constitute the members of the two penal institutions and their actions and interactions structure life within. Although sharing certain characteristics because of their common structural position, it has to be stressed that both groups are not homogenous entities but consist of very different 'elements', i.e. a great variety of inmates (as far as age, gender, origin, offence, legal status, family situation is concerned) as well as, to a slighter extent, different members of staff of different sections of the penitentiary (e.g. management, guardians, social workers, workshops, administration, health service) with varying individual backgrounds, too. The responsible administrative offices, i.e. the migration service (the cantonal immigration agency in charge of decision-making regarding the deportation of foreign national offenders upon their release from prison) and the prison department (the enforcement agency responsible for incarcerating all persons sentenced by the cantonal courts) and their members represent actors of secondary importance. They are not directly part of life in the penitentiaries, but their decisions on conditions of the enforcement of sentences (e.g. right to leaves, change to more open institutions, and release on parole) or on expulsion are of great importance to the present and future of the inmates and influence therefore their life as well as staff's work in the penitentiary. Another structuring source is the relevant *law* which determines the conditions of acting of all the actors mentioned and is situated within a given socio-political context. Members of civil society, as for instance experts, members of NGOs or researchers, are considered to be part of that context.

Variety of data

How to capture this variety of perspectives and dimensions in the data collection is a challenge. In order to understand the legal context, we studied the various kinds of legal texts and regulations. Information on the broader socio-political context was collected from scientific literature, newspaper articles, and expert interviews. The latter also provided us with an external view on the topic of foreigners in Swiss prisons and some of them gave us important information on doing research within penal institutions.

Information on the various groups of actors was collected through semi-structured interviews. We first conducted interviews with a total of 60 foreign national inmates (27 female, 33 male).⁹ The interviews lasted for about two hours each and were done in ten different languages.¹⁰ The interviews took place in a visitors' room and no member of prison staff was present. Interviews were done with two researchers (one female, one male) present: one actually conducting the interview, the other assisting by taking notes in order to have a short protocol of the talk, controlling technical equipment, and checking completeness of the questions discussed as well as time. Interviews focused on the personal experience of prison stay, on contacts to the outside world, on preparation for release and plans for the future. The offence they were convicted for was not part of the interview questions. Interviews with staff (35) were of the same type as with inmates: they followed a semi-structured guideline, were done individually, recorded and lasted up to a maximum of 2 hours. Every section of the penitentiary was represented; out of the groups with close contact to the inmates (guardians, workshops, and social service) several collaborators were interviewed. They were asked about their work in general and about what was specific to working with foreign national inmates.

A third group of interviews was done with staff of the two administrative units (12).¹¹ In these interviews we were mainly interested in getting to know their tasks and competence and in understanding the decision making processes they were responsible for, what criteria they applied and in specific questions related to foreign national offenders.

Another important source of information was samples of inmates' files in the penitentiaries (686) as well as at migration service (299)¹² from the past twenty years. Prison files were chosen randomly. They contain some information on an inmate's offence and judgement and mainly document what has happened since the person has entered the institution (e.g. letters to the management, decisions concerning workplace, education, preparations for release, visits, and leaves). Files at migration service were chosen in order to complement the selected prison files. They mainly inform about immigration topics, among them the decision making process on future deportation of foreign offenders. In general, files provide on the one hand information on inmates, on the other hand they contain specific examples of the decisions and the way administrations and penal institutions work and interact with inmates and how this might have changed over time. The randomly sampled files also provide quantitative data on prison population and their evolution, information on measures taken (e.g. deportation) or rights granted to them (e.g. leaves). Such information can be used for descriptive statistics and give a broad view of the past and present population and their characteristics. Besides, this information helps to contextualise the cases of the interviewed inmates. As regards to information on individual inmates, we additionally included files of all the inmates

who had been interviewed in order to get background information on their prison stay and their biography, including their 'criminal career'. All data on files were collected in a database with a number of pre-determined variables and several 'open' fields for diverse, mainly qualitative data. I will come back to the ethical implications of this method later on.

The analysis of the annual reports (1960–2003) of the penitentiaries added further elements to the historical perspective. Based on this, we were able to reconstruct at what stage foreigners became an important topic in the penal institutions, what staff of different prison sections (e.g. medical doctor, pastor, social assistants) wrote about them, or what other topics or problems were relevant in a given year. Besides this contextual information the reports contain detailed statistics on the prison population which broaden and complement the information taken out of the files. Raw quantitative data on all the foreign inmates who were in the two penitentiaries since 1983 was provided by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics. This information on offence, demography, sentences and stay in the institutions served on the one hand for the sampling for file analysis in the penitentiaries. On the other hand they provide complete overviews of the population that can complement the information taken out of the annual reports.

Table 3.1 Perspectives and types of data

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Type of data</i>
Legal context/ juridical view ¹	Legal texts (international, national, cantonal), internal regulations of penitentiaries
Socio-political context	Scientific literature, newspapers, expert interviews
Male and female foreign national inmates	Interviews; files in penitentiaries and at migration service; observation
Members of staff representing all the sections of the penal institutions	Interviews; files; observation
Members of staff of the two responsible administrative services	Interviews; files
Diachronical view	Files; annual reports; statistical data

In order not just to work with 'second-hand information' from written or oral sources, we did small scale participant observation in the penitentiaries at different occasions. These were possibilities to gather ethnographic data on interactions as well as the architecture and arrangement of the penitentiaries, but also to talk informally to inmates and staff.

At the very beginning of the study we spent five entire days in the female prison. There, we passed the day in the same way as the inmates: working, eating and leisure time in the evening. However, when the inmates were locked in their cells, we stood on the guardian's side of the door and left the penitentiary soon after to come back the next morning. This way, we got to know all of the sections where inmates live together as well as the different workplaces. In the male prison such an extensive stay was not possible, mainly due to security reasons. There, we mainly observed a day with a guardian who showed us around from the moment of unlocking the cells at 6:45 until closing them again at 21:30. Additional, but often only short occasions for observations were given whenever we stayed at the penitentiaries for interviews or file analysis. All of these experiences and observations were recorded in field notes.

Potentials of a multi-perspective research

The main advantages of such a comprehensive research design can be summarised as follows: first of all, it enables a deep as well as broad insight and understanding by taking into account different aspects and variables of a given process. It is therefore especially useful for understanding complex settings with a variety of implicated groups of actors and intertwining processes. The comprehensive understanding is striven for on the one hand by approaching a phenomenon from different perspectives that enables a triangulation of viewpoints. On the other hand, a differentiated, detailed and well-founded view is acquired by a combination of data: comparing and juxtaposing for instance interviews – that inform the researcher about what people think and how they talk about something, how they interpret phenomena, how they remember things that have happened etc. – to other data enables a much deeper understanding of the ongoing processes and of why people act in a given way. For instance, yearly reports, administrative files, statistics, laws and regulations additionally inform about the structuring conditions that are thought of as being enabling and constraining at the same time (see Giddens 1984). And observations of what people actually *do* and how they behave as well as the researchers' experiences and reflections again provide other dimensions.

Besides these epistemological advantages, such an approach can be considered to be positive from an ethical standpoint: Talking and listening to all the important actors and giving them the opportunity to express their own views is one possibility of taking serious and dealing in a respectful way with persons (migrants, staff and administration) under study. For instance, in a context where stereotypes about 'bad inmates' and 'good staff' are as common as their opposite the 'poor inmates' and 'bad staff', such a balanced methodology can be of great value. But also in (migration)

research with people in precarious situations it is essential to aim for a balanced picture because typically, marginalised persons rarely express their views towards outsiders and others ('experts') often only have selective knowledge about their lives.

Additionally, a multi-perspective approach is of special interest for legal anthropology or sociology interested in the structural juridical conditions and their enactment by individual actors (i.e. members of administrations and prisons). The approach of taking into account not only written law and jurisdiction, but also the practice and multiple perspectives of the groups of actors involved, aims for capturing these social phenomena in the most comprehensive way possible. Such an approach is of particular use in contexts that are characterised by large scopes of discretion, i.e. where legal texts do not regulate clearly how to interpret and/or enact what they lay down. As a consequence, the individual members of administration who are responsible for instance for enforcement of sentences, deportation procedures or naturalisation have to shape and interpret the vague legal texts on their own, often based on their own subjective interpretations. Applying a multi-perspective approach can help to disentangle the processes at work and foster the understanding of for instance which foreign offenders will be deported after having completed their sentence and who is allowed to stay in the host country or of whether a certain applicant for naturalisation is finally accepted as a new citizen or not (cf. Achermann & Gass 2003).

Challenges of multi-perspective research

However, it is obvious that such a complex research design entails a number of difficulties and obstacles that we like to share with other researchers. First, it is a laborious and time-consuming way of doing research: a variety of actors needs to be contacted, informed, and convinced of participation; qualitative interviews take their time, and so does the collection of file information. Once data is collected, interviews need to be transcribed, collected information from files needs to be reordered and codified. A lack of time can lead to researchers not taking sufficient time to prepare the data collection well, including advance thinking and planning of the data processing. As gathering the data is considered to be the priority, there is a tendency of repressing the next stage when one would be very grateful for well prepared and structured data. Considering that qualitative research implies an explorative and inductive procedure, preparing in advance completely standardised databases for file analysis or for interview coding is neither possible nor to be aimed for. But still, keeping in mind that taking the time to plan well and try to structure as much as possible – leaving space and possibility for

including information that does not fit into this frame – is surely worth it, especially when dealing with big quantities of data. This aspect is even more important if there is more emphasis on comparative aspects. In such a case a well prepared baseline study is needed in the course of which the research tools are developed and tested before starting to work on the other comparative cases. Another challenge related to time is not to lose sight of the fact that the possibilities to gather data are limited due to time and/or money constraints. As the multi-perspective approach actually aims at looking at ‘everything’ it can be difficult to define the moment where to stop data collection and make the point on the basis of what is at hand. Although risking not capturing as broad, as clear or as multifaceted a picture as intended, it is important to plan from the beginning the point of time when data collection is to be finished and analysis and writing of the report to be started. A second challenge to such an approach is the dependency on the access to all – or at least the most important – sources of data. If authorities or the management of the penitentiaries would not have agreed to cooperate and to grant access to files, to host us during almost two years of periodical data gathering and to let us conduct interviews with staff and inmates during working time, the realisation of the study would have been in serious peril.

Finally, when it comes to analysing the data and enacting what has been described to be the aims and advantages of the multi-perspective triangulation, there is another set of challenges waiting for the researcher: how is it possible to really treat the different perspectives in a balanced and just way? How to keep track of all the information and data in varying sources and formats? And how to analyse the details of the complex processes, elaborate what is happening and what the perspectives of the different actors are? As it might be typical for qualitative research, there is no general recipe, formula or computer programme that would guide researchers in this process. However, some basic rules might help others to find their way more easily through this jungle of information: At first an overview of the collected data has to be obtained and a system of how to order and classify needs to be developed. The idea of this is to know what kind of information has been gathered and to easily find the relevant details if needed. It can be useful to create a table or database with the key-variables for the analysis and fill in a résumé of the information from the varying sources. In the prison study this was mainly done with the information on inmates’ socio-demographic characteristics, conviction and punishment, inclusion and exclusion from rehabilitation as well as preparation for release and on deportation or removal. Having classified data already before in a systematic manner facilitates the creation of such an overview considerably. However, when processing and analysing data it is important to remember that this overview is a superficial summary that is not thought to replace the details of the collected data. Rather, it

should be considered to be a kind of guidepost leading to raw data which provide substance and illustration. When it comes to putting together different perspectives and keeping a balanced view, teamwork can be very useful and efficient in order to track the general outlines.

Doing research in penal institutions

After the sketch of the general approach, the focus will now be on the process of data collection in the particular context of two penitentiaries. There is a wide range of methodological and ethical questions that have to be solved before even entering a prison as a researcher, and more of them follow once the collection of data on the topic of foreign inmates is about to start. These experiences shall be shared with other researchers, especially those planning studies in the prison context.¹³ Certain questions mentioned here are neither typical for the penal context nor exclusive to migration research. But both of these conditioning aspects structure in a very particular way the interactions and thereby define a specific context. There are mainly two areas where the peculiarities of migration research play an important role: on the one hand there is the precarious situation of the foreign national inmates: they are subject to multiple marginalisations by being at the same time incarcerated, criminal, foreign (and therefore deportable), often of low socio-economic status and frequently socially isolated. Lack of knowledge about the penal system and their rights, aggravated if they do not speak and understand the local language and the possible uncertainty concerning their deportation after release are further characteristics typical for non-national inmates. This not only affects their everyday life and therefore the topics to be treated in the interviews, but, as will be discussed later on, also asks for special sensitivity to and reflexivity towards power relations between researchers and the persons in the focus of the study. On the other hand, criminal foreigners are a sensitive topic, very often debated in an emotional way and instrumentalised for political purposes. Members of prison staff and management as well as of authorities tend to be very cautious in talking about this subject because they are not supposed to utter their personal political view and because of fear of either being blamed for discrimination or for doing harm to the foreign national inmates. This needs to be considered and asks for special proceeding in the course of preparation of the study but also when it comes to the publication of results. Sticking to a professional scientific attitude and working method seems of special importance in this case.

In the following three main aspects of doing research in penal institutions will be discussed: Getting access to the field of study, getting access to inmates as well as the relation between researchers and researched, and finally the personal coping of the researcher in this area of study.

Access to prisons

Unless s/he commits a crime, it is not an easy thing to get into a prison as a researcher.¹⁴ Penal institutions are not only well protected to prevent inmates from escaping but also towards outsiders wanting to enter. Especially closed penitentiaries with high security-standards are highly controlled organisations where deviations from the normal order are first of all considered to be a risk and to cause problems. Even if the final decision to participate in the study lies with the head of the responsible administration, the first hurdle to take is to gain trust and interest by the prison management.¹⁵ Besides presenting a research project that is thoroughly done and of a certain relevance to the prison, too, personal meetings to get to know each other are an indispensable precondition for a good start. Pre-existing contacts to the management facilitate this process a great deal. The main task is to convince that research will be done carefully, that the rules (especially of security and data protection) and the special logic of the institution will be respected and that no trouble will be caused, apart from some efforts connected to the data gathering. In our case, once the directors of the two prisons had agreed to support our study, they granted us full confidence and great room for manoeuvre, opened us their gates whenever we wanted, helped us in organising the interviews, gave us access to their archives for file analysis, etc. The only limits to our freedom as researchers were security concerns. Such precautions however were intended to protect us from possible harm and were not an expression of mistrust. An example for this was that contrary to lawyers we were never expected to pass the metal detector at the entrance of the prison.

Besides adhering to security rules we were expected to respect concerns related to protection of privacy of the inmates. A contract subjecting us to strict duties concerning data and privacy protection was signed at the very beginning of the study with both of the prisons and the administrative services. In that respect we were considered equal to staff so that in our presence people did not need to be cautious giving names of inmates or to hide documents containing personal information. As far as members of staff were concerned, for them this was another symbol that we could be considered trustworthy. Apart from respecting the privacy of the inmates, the managements were also concerned with their basic rights in general. Regarding our study this meant in the first sense that they would have to voluntarily agree to an interview. Whereas for us as researchers it was evident that it would not only be unethical but also completely useless to oblige persons – inmates as well as members of staff – to participate in an interview, the managements' concern was mainly to avoid accusations of having forced inmates to participate. In order to prevent this, before beginning the interview every inmate had to sign a form in which s/he declared to participate voluntarily and thereby expressed his/her informed consent.

The fact that our study had not been funded or mandated as an evaluation study by a public service somehow connected to, or even in charge of, the penitentiaries turned out to be an advantage. Even if this was not that much of a deliberate choice, the fact that the project was financed as part of a larger programme promoting fundamental research (cf. above) probably facilitated access to the institutions as well as to interview partners. The advantages of this background were twofold: In the potentially sensitive context of foreigners and prisons where fears of being controlled and blamed for doing something wrong are considerable – not least because very often these are the only occasions when prisons attract public interest –, it was of great use to make credible that our work was independent, scientific and not linked to any immediate political mandate. For the interviewed members of staff and management this facilitated talking openly because they would be less concerned that, based on their statements, changes in their institution would be decided on or that there could be negative consequences for themselves. For us as researchers it was an advantage too: we were clearly in the position of outsiders to the entire penal system (cf. Waldram 1998: 240) and appreciated that we could just step into these organisations and start to discover them as if we were ‘aliens’. Another advantage was that we did not have to struggle with problems of accountability towards a sponsor and his ideas of how to conduct our research. Thereby we did not encounter the kind of problems Waldram (1998: 242) describes for the case of a proposed – and finally refused – contract research where the correctional officials would have had to be granted access to all original records and data including the revelation of the informants’ identities.

Access to interview partners in prisons and establishing rapport

Once access to the prison and the possibility to do interviews is granted, the next hurdles to take are first to find inmates and staff who are ready to give an interview. Second, as most scientific literature on prison research highlights, ‘establishing rapport’ (Patenaude 2004) and gaining trust are crucial to create an interview situation in which an open and trustful interaction can take place. Both tasks include a number of ethical but also methodological aspects that need to be considered in order to comply with scientific standards.

Preparations: Sampling and willingness to participate

When preparing interviews in the prison context researchers have to be aware of some particularities of this area that are not as obvious at first sight as are security concerns. For instance, it is important to bear in mind that

inmates as well as members of staff of prison are marginal groups with weak social prestige and with hardly any lobby defending their interests. This entails one negative and one positive consequence: Inmates and members of staff are generally suspicious towards outsiders and critical about what they want from them. Researchers therefore have to gain their interest and respect. The positive side of this marginal situation is that prisons are rather rarely researched organisations¹⁶ and that their members may be happy about the interest in them and therefore be open to participation. A second aspect is that penal institutions are by definition characterised by strong power hierarchy, coercion and limited autonomy of the inmates. As mentioned above, due to their multiple marginalization foreign prisoners might be or feel even stronger affected by this condition than national inmates. Researchers need to be aware of this context, but at the same time have to bear in mind that they are not part of these power relations themselves. In other words: it is not researchers' task to take part in the enacting of the prison's duties towards the inmates or in supporting inmates to withdraw from these constraining conditions, but rather to observe and try to understand what is going on and take these relations to be a topic for study.

Being sensitive to power relations can interfere with researchers' aims to choose a balanced sample and to attain a given number of interview partners. In order to achieve exactly the sample planned the selected inmates could be obliged to participate. However, as it has been mentioned above, both for ethical and methodological reasons participation in interviews has to be voluntary. For our study we chose two different approaches to mobilising inmates to participate in the interviews: in the female prison we invited¹⁷ all of the foreign inmates to information events in the section where they lived and informed them personally about who we were, what we planned to do and what an interview would imply.¹⁸ Those interested in participating were asked to fill in a form. This first round of information and mobilising was a crucial moment for the whole project as we had absolutely no idea whether the inmates would be willing to talk to us or not. If they were not this would have been a serious problem for our research design. It was a positive surprise however that more than half (27) of the total foreign inmate population (48) was ready to give us an interview. It seems that Waldram's observation that the inmates seized the 'offer to consent to, and meaningfully participate in, the research as an opportunity to express their limited autonomy' (1998: 241) corresponds to our own experience. Apart from the voluntary interest to participate no other criteria was applied for the sample of female inmates to be interviewed. We were lucky that we managed to have a broad range of different situations represented, although there were quite a large number of Brazilian drug traffickers and no foreign inmate of the second generation among them. Concerning the big group of Brazilians it was evident and we were told by

the management too that we could not turn down inmates once they had decided they wanted to participate. For the second group of the '*secondas*' we tried to convince some of these inmates but they refused because, among other things, they did not feel part of the group of 'foreign inmates'.

Based on this first experience of considerable interest in working with us we adapted our strategy for the male prison. As the absolute number of foreign inmates was much higher (146) and we did not have the time to interview all of them, we made a first choice of inmates to be invited to an information event. This choice was based on theoretical sampling striving for a broad representation of different situations as far as origin, legal status, age, duration of sentence, and duration of stay in prison was concerned. The offence itself was no criterion of choice.¹⁹ The procedure of informing and signing on corresponded to the one in the female prison except for informing (in German, English and French) all of the invited inmates at the same time in the assembly hall. Here too, there was big interest in our study: out of 35 invited inmates 33 participated in the information meeting and 31 finally filled in the form.²⁰

For the interviews with members of staff, the procedure was slightly different: after having informed the staff on what we were doing, we communicated to the management with how many collaborators of which divisions of the prison we wanted to talk to. Thereafter, we were given a plan of persons being willing and available the days the interviews were done. It seemed that members of staff had not been obliged to participate, however contrary to the inmates there might have been more pressure and expectation on them to agree. As regards to this aspect of voluntary participation in the institutional setting of the penitentiary as well as in qualitative research in general, it is obvious that staff as well as inmates may not have decided completely freely to participate because they could have expected either positive consequences of presenting themselves or negative consequences if not doing so. Researchers cannot entirely control such dynamics. From an ethical perspective however it is important that also during the interview persons are not pushed or even constrained to tell things and give information. Considering interviewees – even in the coercive context of a prison – as powerful, reasonable and responsible actors who have the choice to decide on what they want to tell in the interview and what they want to keep to themselves we tried to be alert to any expression of such refusal.

Another important task during the preparation of the interviews was to gain respect, of the inmates as well as of the members of staff. We thought that would be the first step towards gaining trust during the interview. The number of people showing interest in having an interview illustrates the importance of our strategy of informing inmates on what our research project was about in an open and understandable way (including translation). It demonstrated that we were independent and could be trusted in.

Still, it was obvious that the foreign inmates were not only willing to talk to us because they were convinced of the importance of our research and that we were trustworthy persons. The simple fact that the interviews would take place during working hours and would be an occasion to talk to an unknown man and a woman for two hours, maybe even with a translator, must have been a big incentive for many of them.

Participation in the interview: opening up, building trust, and interaction between interviewees and researchers

Agreeing to give an interview does not mean that the person in question automatically talks in an open way and that a trustful atmosphere develops between the interviewee and the researcher. The way the first interactions and the beginning of the cooperation happened certainly influences the interview. But building up an open and confidential interaction during the interview in which the informant talks freely about what s/he thinks, does and feels is part of the interviewer's work.²¹ As far as foreign national inmates are concerned, creating trust can be a different process if we compare it with other inmates. It is possible that out of fear or earlier experienced lack of respect, abuse or discrimination they do not trust anybody in the prison context as principle (see also Barsky in this book). But it is also possible, and rather corresponds to our experiences, that they are less suspicious because most of them will be deported upon release and as such they are not afraid of being recognised in public.

The general conditions of the interview that determine the first impressions are important aspects that should not be neglected: the location where the interviews take place deserves some reflection. We did our interviews in rooms familiar to most of the inmates: in the visitors' room in the female prison and the room where inmates meet advocates or priests in the male prison. The fact that these were positively known places to the inmates where they have lived moments of privacy before was certainly an advantage. As two researchers were present at every interview, the seating order was important in order to prevent the inmate from finding him/herself facing a 'row' of researchers, almost like facing a court. Another point was that the inmates would sit with their back to a door with a window in it in order to avoid him/her being distracted or feeling that other people could be present.

For the interviews we did with an interpreter, besides the usual challenges to translated interviews (e.g. interaction between three parties, control of the interview, not being able to check the quality of translation) for the prison context we had to consider additional aspects: first, translators had to be accepted by the prison management and sign a contract of data protection as well. Second, we had to brief them well, find solutions

for some of their fears (e.g. one translator did not want the inmates to get to know his real name) and especially ensure that the translator would not be a danger to a trustful interview atmosphere because of the influence of his/her own attitudes. Particularly with rather small linguistic groups in a given country, privacy and data protection can be a problem as the translator and the interviewee risk knowing each other or having common acquaintances.²²

With regard to confidentiality of the interviews it was obvious to everyone that they were not completely anonymous as it was generally known which inmates and which members of staff did participate. Because of this we told the interviewees that if they wanted to tell us something that should in no way be related to their person they should tell and we would treat this information with special caution. This means that in publications such information can neither be quoted nor be contextualised by relating it to characteristics of the informant like his/her origin, age or – in the case of members of staff – their function. Interviewees were asked if they agreed to us recording the interview, what can be considered to be a first test if they really trusted us. Only one member of staff (out of 35) and one inmate (out of 60) refused the recording. Some members of staff however asked at a certain point in the conversation to turn the recorder off because they were giving confidential or delicate information. With others we realised that off the record – e.g. during breaks for smoking outside the interview room or after the interview – they talked in a different, more informal way naming problems more openly.

Besides such general conditions of the interview, the personal interaction between interviewee and researcher is crucial for the outcome of the interview. Nowadays, it is broadly acknowledged in qualitative research that personal characteristics of researchers (e.g. gender, age, language, socio-economic status) influence the way interviewees react and respond. Instead of trying to eliminate this influence there is some common sense that reflecting status differences and power relations between researchers and interviewees might be more important and also of more use. This is especially true when working with people in precarious conditions and when the status differences and power hierarchy between the two actors are particularly large. Our case of Swiss researchers living in freedom interviewing foreign national prison inmates is certainly an example of such a situation. So what to do about it? On the one hand merely being aware of such differences and their effects during the interview and when analysing data seems to be crucial. This means that it is important to consider and deal cautiously with aspects of power and status differences in order to prevent from doing harm to the persons under study but also from distortions of the results due to misunderstandings. On the other hand, special emphasis might be given to building up trust and to overcome social distance during the interview.²³ A first step to do this is to encounter the

interviewees as responsible and reasonable actors. Part of this is to tell them in an open and transparent way what the study is about, what will result from it and what the position and task of the researcher is. Inmates as well as members of staff should understand that the researcher is not on a particular side of any of the actors, but that s/he is listening to all of them and trying to understand what is happening how and why.

When it comes to creating trust, qualitative interviews are certainly well suited as their open and less standardised character leaves room to consider the individual, to accord him the possibility to bring in his/her own topics and to tell 'his story' or to focus on certain topics. By this the interviewee is granted certain autonomy, given room to talk and thereby shown respect and taken seriously.²⁴ This is a way of fostering a trustful talk that most interviewees appreciate and profit from. Liebling (1999: 155) points to one lesson she had learned when doing interviews with prisoners: 'how obliging staff and prisoners can be, and how open to interested outsiders', which exactly corresponds to our experience. But also researchers need to be open, interested, unbiased and above all empathic in order to contribute to a good atmosphere of open speech. In the case of prison inmates this could be difficult: how to be empathic with someone who committed a crime? An important aspect facilitating to meet interviewees without any prejudices and an unbiased attitude was that we did not know at that point what offence they were in prison for.²⁵ This way, it was easier to get to know the inmates in the first sense as persons with their particular stories, and not as offenders. Some of them talked about their offence in the course of the interview – mostly if it was not related to physical violence or if they presented themselves as being innocent – others never mentioned it. Because of our main research interest in the present life in the penal institution and in the inmates' future we did not need to ask about their (criminal) past if they did not mention it. It was obvious that the inmates appreciated our interviews especially because for once they could talk for up to two hours to outsiders who were only interested in themselves as persons and not in what kind of offence they had committed.

Nevertheless, there is a second side of the coin in creating trustful relations to interviewees: there is a danger for the researchers of losing distance, of getting involved and touched too much by the stories and fate of the inmates. Discussing an 'anthropology of prisons', Rhodes (2001: 76) highlights that '[t]o forget one's position as an outsider is to be in danger, not only from interpersonal trouble of various kinds but, more enduringly from emotional and intellectual identifications'. The more an informant opens up and shows emotions – tears were frequent, especially when asking about their families – the more difficult it gets to keep what is called 'professional distance' (cf. below). As the researcher might be one of the first persons the foreign inmate has talked to in such a way since s/he entered the prison, even within the short period of time of the interview a

kind of closeness can develop between the two parties. This is especially true for foreign nationals who tend not to be visited on a regular basis. In this situation the researcher has to try to keep the balance between gaining trust, showing empathy, but still keeping a needed distance and being transparent to the inmates with regard to what s/he can do for them and what is not possible. Foreign inmates very often not having many contacts to Swiss (apart from staff), there is a considerable danger of them hoping or even expecting researchers to be able to help them in one way or the other, be it to get out of prison, not to be deported, to be granted prison leave or to get a – in their perspective – fair trial. But not only inmates expect researchers to be on their side, the same is true for members of staff. Whereas for inmates it is the interest taken in them and the built up trust that is the main ground for taking for granted that the researcher takes a stand for them, in case of staff it might rather be the common nationality and the fact of being non-criminals that makes them expect the researchers to be on their side. However, some members of staff rather thought, probably because of the focus of our study, that we were on the foreign inmates' side, wanted to defend them and therefore were suspicious of our unbiased attitude (cf. Liebling 1999: 168). Some of them revised their view while talking to us, others probably never really trusted that we were striving for a balanced view.

The topic of expectations leads to another ethical question that had to be solved: what can researchers return for the information, trust and openness they receive from inmates? Of course, this is no new question to any person gathering data in social sciences. However, interviewing marginalised persons who not only mostly lack interest, recognition and respect but also dispose of limited economic and social resources, this question is even more important and needs serious reflection. In our case, as an explicit sign of gratitude and reciprocity, all the inmates we interviewed were sent a short letter thanking them and a phone card they could use to call from the prison. Besides, we told them to make public in our research reports their point of view and thereby 'give them a voice'.²⁶ Additionally, some people asked us for information on practical or administrative things we were able to explain and thereby giving something back to them. But as it became evident after some interviews, probably the most important thing we could give was our interest, respect and recognition as human beings. The overwhelming majority of the inmates expressed their gratitude for this at the end of the interviews, some in extensive and almost formal speeches. Some even wanted to invite us to their cell in order to offer us a cup of tea. And a few sent us letters thanking us for the interview and our little gift.²⁷

Once the interviews finished, other ethical concerns had to be solved: as outlined above, we intended to complement our view by analysing not only interviews but also inmates' files. We thought about asking inmates

for their consent to do this, finally renounced to it because of two reasons: first, there were some doubts if inmates would still trust us or if they would misunderstand this as being a way to control whether they were telling the truth in the interviews. Second, as we were analysing a great number of files most of which were about persons that had already been released, it would have been strange to ask some of the inmates for their consent and others not. Finally, we came to the conclusion that when reading the files after the interviews, the inmates would not be concerned and it would not cause any harm to them. Other researchers in similar contexts tell about dilemmas of another type: what to do with so called 'dirty information', i.e. information on which difficult decisions on how to use it have to be made (Thomas & Marquart 1987)? In none of our interviews we were confronted to such kind of information. However, when doing research in areas like prisons one should be prepared to getting to know things that can have an effect on you as a researcher but that also can damage the informants if they should become public.²⁸

Personal coping as a researcher

Doing interviews in potentially stressing environments like penitentiaries and with people living in difficult situations can be hard to cope with for researchers. Surprisingly enough, such aspects are rarely talked about or mentioned in scientific literature. It seems as if in science people doing research do not exist as human beings but merely as researchers, anthropologists, sociologists, etc. However, as Liebling (1999) points out in an article on doing research in the penal context we can and should not forget that we are at the same time researchers and human beings with subjective feelings. Instead of pretending to be a tool to make us forget our human part, methodology should rather serve for taking into account these emotional aspects and dealing with them consciously. In the study on foreign national inmates in closed prisons there were three set of challenges concerning these questions of personal coping that shall be discussed in the following.

First, the balance between 'professional distance' and showing empathy can be a problem. Liebling stresses that their 'interviews were frequently very emotional, for interviewer and interviewee alike. Often, we emerged from these encounters exhausted, upset, occasionally uplifted' (1999: 158). Interviewing prisoners can provoke two kinds of emotional reactions: compassion with a sad or tragic story or repudiation towards what the interviewee has done. Typically, a researcher would be expected to stay neutral, to keep a professional distance and not to show any emotions. However, such a demand is contradictory to the need for creating a trustful atmosphere in which the researchers show empathy and try to take the

perspective of the interviewees so that these would tell what their lives, fears and other feelings are about. Such challenges to researchers of opening and still keeping a distance are not exclusive to the prison experience and to migration research. However, due to their often isolated situations people in precarious situations might be more likely to seize such an opportunity for baring their soul to the researcher listening empathically.

Based on our experiences, two aspects seem to be important in dealing with this balancing act: on the one hand, during the interview we tried to show compassion, patience, and listen. Sometimes, being interested and trying to understand the interviewee's point of view was the closest we were able to get to being comprehensive. Very emotional situations (e.g. sadness, anger, desperation) need their time before going ahead with other interview questions. However, it is crucial not to lose control of the interview. As Liebling (1999: 156) describes there can be situations where researchers are asked or expected to help in a given situation and take action. Here too, the challenge is to keep the balance between on the one hand sticking to the role of the researcher who does not advocate for the interviewed and helping within predefined and transparently communicated limits on the other hand. For instance, if asked for, we did give advice concerning whom a person can turn to in a difficult situation or with urgent questions. But we refrained from taking concrete action as well as from taking a stand on questions like if something was right or wrong or if the inmate had been convicted rightfully or not. On the other hand, after the interview it was important to think and discuss about our experiences and personal reactions. For such a kind of debriefing, doing interviews in pairs is of great help. However, as Liebling highlights, discussing in the research team in an open way and explicitly referring to subjective feelings is not only important for personal coping, but also for interpreting and understanding: '[O]ur emotions do not need to be reconciled with our so-called data. They constitute data. They require critical reflection and triangulation, and 'faithful representation', but not selective inattention. [. . .] [R]eflexivity with an ethic seems to me to provide a way of tackling the emotional dimension of research honestly and with some purpose' (1999: 164).

The second challenge is specific to the multi-perspective research approach: working with diverse sources of data can imply two difficulties concerning personal coping. As we looked at inmates' files after the interviews we experienced some surprises in getting to know another side of the persons we had talked to. As the great majority of the interviews were done in a very open, comfortable, and mutually respectful way, the sometimes shocking stories of the offences these same persons had committed was a confusing experience. For instance, there was one man with whom I had a very interesting and reflective talk about life in prison. When I read his file and learnt that he had raped a young woman, I ended up quite confused

and found it hard to imagine that the man I had talked to and the one I read about in the files were the same person. This somehow upsetting experience concerned the research or data collection only as far as it confirmed the importance of having separated and sequenced the two information sources, i.e. of not having seen the files before doing the interviews. Moreover, it was mainly a point to deal with and a reason to reflect upon individually and as a team for instance on the challenges to our ideas of what is 'good' or 'evil', but also on what our reactions tell us that could be useful for the understanding of the research topic.

Another difficulty related to the multi-perspective research approach was to take into account and do interviews with different actors involved. Obviously, staff, inmates and members of authorities had quite different views on certain questions. Although this makes it very interesting to analyse, while doing interviews the researcher can, to a certain point, feel divided because s/he tries to put him-/herself into the different situations and tries to understand all of the perspectives described. Here again, being conscious of such impressions, noting them down and reflecting upon them, including possible influences on the way the interview was done is very important. Conducting interviews with different groups of actors separately and if possible even with some time in-between the interview blocks can facilitate the distancing of the view of a given group and make it easier to be open again to get to know the other 'side'.²⁹

The third challenge concerning personal coping is the danger of 'going native'. Even if we did not do 'proper' participant observation in the sense of participating in prison life for a long period of time, there were two incidents that made me realise that I and my perspective had changed: first, one morning when coming to the female prison in order to continue work in the archive, the security officer at the gate welcomed me, knew my name and told me that after all the time I was already almost a part of 'them'. Second, in the course of another research project I once went to visit a detention centre for foreigners. Afterwards, I talked to an anthropologist who had been at the same place recently. Whereas to me it was mainly 'another prison', with some particularities and many commonalities that were familiar and somehow 'normal', the colleague being a 'prison-newcomer' was quite upset and somehow even shocked after having seen the inmates, the cells and locked doors, the gangways of cells and all the other characteristics and symbols of the coercive conditions of imprisonment. As Liebling (1999: 163) writes, 'the risks of 'going native' are high – particularly when long periods of time are spent with staff and prisoners in the 'deep end' of prison life'. The two incidents made me realise that I had started to really become part of the two institutions and the 'prison world'. The question then is what researchers should do when they get to that point: leave the field because we are losing distance? Or is this actually the point where we start to know the context, its rules and the

significances really well and therefore begin to understand what is happening? Probably both parts are true in a way. However, more important in this sense seems to be that the researcher does not get involved to the point of really identifying with the subject and that s/he keeps the ability of reflecting what is happening to him-/herself, records these experiences and takes them into account for the analysis. However, before being able to analyse data properly, it is necessary to gain back distance to the field of the penitentiary as well as to its actors in order to really apply a balanced multi-perspective research approach.

Lessons learnt and what to change the next time

To finish I would like to point out what I would change next time when conducting a similar research. A first point concerns the group of inmates to be interviewed. If possible the group of inmates taken into account for the interviews should be enlarged in two senses: on the one hand possibilities would have to be found how to attain broader sampling of (especially the female) inmates. The challenge would mainly be how to reach those foreign national inmates that had been born or had grown up in Switzerland and who did not consider themselves as belonging to the group of 'foreign inmates'. Specific and adapted ways of inviting and informing this and/or other groups that are hard to reach would have to be found and applied. On the other hand if at all possible (as regards to the financial resources of the project) national inmates should be included into the research as well. There were some Swiss inmates asking us why they had been excluded from the interviews and who did not understand the reasons for this choice (actually being purely pragmatic due to lack of money and time). Rather, they took it as a confirmation that once more the majority of the foreign inmates did get more attention and special treatment compared to them. Doing interviews with a sample of all inmates (national and foreign) would add another perspective on life in prison and contribute to, among other things, differentiate what is particular to foreign inmates and what might be typical for all kind of inmates, independent of their nationality. In contrast, the particular focus on the migration topic and sampling in this logic can result in a restricted view on the prison as a whole.

A second point concerns participant observation that has hardly been mentioned up to now due to the focus on the interviews. Although it was not possible to do 'real' participant observation over a prolonged period of time, we spent a lot of time in the prisons while collecting our data (interviews and file research) and had a lot of occasions to observe interactions and ethnographic details. Even while sitting in a room next to the secretary and just noticing the daily routines, when eating in the cafeteria with

staff or when crossing inmates going to or coming from work we learnt a lot about how these organisations work, how people behave within them, and what effects the organisations have on people living and working in them. Such observations were recorded in field notes. Besides, there were many occasions where we too realised the restricted mobility in a prison – if for instance you depend on a guard opening doors for you even for such basic needs as going to a toilet.³⁰

But still, being able to participate more and having more occasions for informal talks to all members of the penitentiary would certainly have enriched data and deepened our understanding. Looking at it retrospectively it could have been worth asking the prison management for doing participant observation once again after they had got to know us and the way we were working and after we had got to know the institution with its rules and *modus operandi* as well as some inmates and members of staff. In the literature on prison ethnography there are some examples of researchers who managed by different means to do participant observation in penitentiaries: Jones (1995) being an inmate himself, Fleisher (1989) working as a guardian, and Le Caisne (2000) got into the prison as a trainee for two weeks and then prolonged her stay as a researcher for two years. If the first two examples raise ethical concerns as regards to ‘undercover research’, the latter is confronted with a problem Rhodes (2001: 76) hints to: ‘no outsider/ observer can ‘participate’ in the situation of the prisoner’.

Conclusion

This chapter is not about giving recipes or presenting best practice on doing migration research in the prison context. It aims much more at sharing experiences and reflecting on methodology and ethics with other researchers in order to make ourselves aware of possible pitfalls and to encourage thinking beforehand about strategies for challenges to appear. The underlying epistemological attitude is the Weberian (1968) idea of social sciences aiming at ‘interpretive understanding’ and explanation of social action that asks for an adequate methodology and includes ethical considerations.

The multi-perspective research approach used in a study on foreign national inmates in closed Swiss prisons intends to understand in the most comprehensive way what the phenomenon of a majority of foreign prisoners in the two penal institutions is about, what it implies and to find explanations for why things are happening in a given way. Besides the potentials of this broad, deep and complex research design taking into account not only the perspective of a variety of actors but also diverse types of data, difficulties are discussed as well. A major problem of such an

approach is that working with multiple partners and diverse data is rather time consuming: there has to be a base for cooperation with several organisations built up, their own logic has to be understood, qualitative data collection itself takes time, etc. Teamwork therefore is almost indispensable, also in order to be able to keep a balanced view, triangulate the different perspectives and data and validate interpretations.

The interaction between researchers and researched foreign inmates as well as members of staff mainly in the course of the interviews is given special attention. Focussing on how to get access to the institution and to the persons themselves, the question is how interest and trust can be gained and what difficulties for instance concerning interviewees' expectations towards interviewers can arise. Another aspect of this rapport between researchers and researched concerns the very often unmentioned questions of how to cope as a researcher with the potentially emotionally stressing consequences of working with people in precarious conditions. Here again, working in a team is an important resource for personal coping as well as for making subjective experiences useful for scientific purposes.

As regards to methodological and ethical questions in migration research more generally, the following aspects can be highlighted as a summary:

- It is important that researchers respect in a balanced way both their responsibility towards scientific interests on the one hand and responsibility towards the people they study (be they migrants, prison staff or authorities) on the other hand. Applying a multi-perspective design can be an attempt to satisfy both of these demands by trying to understand a complex phenomenon in its diversity and complexity and to embrace and do justice to the multiple perspectives of the actors involved.
- The example of the prison study showed the importance of considering the vulnerability of migrants as well as the potential political sensitivity of migration topics from staff or authorities' point of view. Personal contacts in the preparation of data collection to both groups of actors in order to build up trust is one important part of this. Anyway, trust turned out to be a key concept on which most of the data collection and therefore the execution of the study depends. Thinking about the methodological question of how to gain it and the ethical duty of not abusing it are of paramount importance in contexts considered to be sensitive due to precarious situations and/or anxieties of the actors involved.
- A third challenge that is common to qualitative research with marginalised groups – for instance also with undocumented migrants – is to keep the balance between involvement and distance in relation to the field and the actors of the study. Persons otherwise having few

resources tend to consider researchers they got to know as being trustful and understanding as part of their personal network. Consequently, they might expect them for instance to help or become friends. How to limit and deal with such expectations in a personally, ethically and methodologically responsible way should be reflected on before starting data collection.

Applying, testing and modifying the presented multi-perspective approach with regards to other research topics and sharing such experiences would be of great interest and a possibility to continue reflection on how to cope with methodological and ethical challenges migration research can be confronted with. Interdisciplinary exchange with other fields having to find strategies for questions like balance between involvement and distance, status differences, and personal coping (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, social work) could provide additional inputs for dealing with these challenges in research projects (see also introduction of this book) and thereby add another dimension to multi-perspective research.

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Notes

- 1 Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, imprisonment statistics as at 8th February 2007.
- 2 See for early articles on the topic Baechtold (2000) and Wicker (2002).
- 3 The project 'Foreigners in Closed Swiss Prisons: Issues of their Management and the Problem of Resocialisation in the Context of National Law, Migration Control, and Transnational Mobility' was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation in its National Research Programme 51 'Social Integration and Social Exclusion'. The study was conceptualised and guided by Hans-Rudolf Wicker (Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern), project collaborators were Christin Achermann, Ueli Hostettler and Jonas Weber (legal expert). Research was carried out between September 2003 and August 2005. Cf. more details: http://www.nfp51.ch/e_module.cfm?Slanguage=e&get=32&Projects.Command=details.
- 4 'Unerwünscht' is the term used in the foreign nationals act as in force until the end of the year 2007. The new law does not use this term anymore.
- 5 See for an overview of the Swiss penal system the article by Baechtold (2001)

- and the publication by the Federal Office of Justice (2006) (http://www.bj.admin.ch/etc/medialib/data/sicherheit/straf_und_massnahmen/documentation.Par.0006.File.tmp/smv-ch-e.pdf).
- 6 For an example of some strategies of that type in British prisons see the report by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2006) and the handbook for foreign national prisoners by HM Prison Service (2004).
 - 7 For more results of the overall research see Achermann (2008) and Achermann & Hostettler (2006, 2007).
 - 8 Goffman (1961a, 1961b) opposes these two groups as belonging to two distinct 'worlds' thereby stressing the different roles and conditions.
 - 9 Another possibility for taking into account the inmates' views would be to collect information not by face-to-face interaction but by written testimonies sent to the researchers by mail (Bosworth et al. 2005). This could be especially useful if access to the penitentiary is not granted. However, as letters might be checked by staff, confidentiality of the information transmitted can hardly be guaranteed.
 - 10 About a third of all interviews were done with the help of interpreters for the following languages: Albanian, Arab, Brazilian Portuguese, Kurdish, Tamil, and Turkish.
 - 11 Two of these interviews were done with staff of the prison department of the Canton of Zurich, the rest with administrative staff from the Canton of Bern.
 - 12 Out of these 60 files were analysed in depth. The others mainly provided information on the legal status of the inmates.
 - 13 See Patenaude (2004) for an article discussing qualitative research 'within correctional contexts' in the U.S. The author being a former correctional officer, he was confronted with specific challenges and advantages: 'My previous status as a correctional officer was a concern akin to a double-edged sword; it was believed that it could increase rapport with the staff ranks (correctional officers and treatment staff), yet it could also decrease any such rapport among those inmates being studied if care was not taken to show a lack of bias' (Patenaude 2004: 77s).
 - 14 Jones (1995) gives an example of a prison study he did while himself being an inmate in a maximum security prison for one year. He describes it as a 'unique approach to the study of prisons, an ethnographic study that utilised a complete participant (inmate-sociologist) and an outside observer (sociology professor) as a way of achieving an insider's understanding while maintaining an outsider's objectivity' (Jones 1995: 106).
 - 15 Switzerland has no review boards, ethical committees or similar institutions for social sciences that have to approve a study for instance on vulnerable populations as prisoners are normally considered to be.
 - 16 Wacquant (2002: 387) supposes that the low social status of prisons and inmates as objects of study is one reason for the 'curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration'. However, I think the main reasons for the scarce ethnographic research in penal institutions are mainly to be sought in (supposed) difficulties of access and in personal reservation towards confrontation with offenders and penitentiaries.
 - 17 All of the foreign national inmates were handed out a written invitation in German, Portuguese, English, French or Spanish.

- 18 As there was a considerable number of Brazilian inmates at that time, we were accompanied by a Brazilian Portuguese-speaking interpreter already at these information events.
- 19 However, on the lists our choice was made on, the offences were noted as well. In general, we did not pay attention to this information. Nevertheless, one inmate who was among the first choice of potential interviewees and who had been sentenced for paedophilic deeds was excluded because of the objection of one interviewer.
- 20 While doing the interviews, we accepted two more persons who expressed their will to participate as well. Due to time reasons we had to refuse further inmates who would also have been interested.
- 21 How the interviewees experience the interview as such and what the questions asked by the researcher can trigger is hardly known and discussed. The article by Bosworth et al. (2005) that is co-authored by a researcher and four inmates deals with the 'views from inside' and with the 'emotional nature of being part of a study and how a researcher gains participants' trust' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 249).
- 22 Translators should be instructed beforehand to tell the researchers if they find out that they know the interviewee. This way they can decide together if the interview should be postponed and done with another translator.
- 23 Bourdieu (1997: 784, 787f) emphasises this point and the way different positions of interviewers and informants in the social space can create distortions. He therefore pleads for taking into account both the individual story and fate and its particular social context. Furthermore, he suggests using interviewers of the same social field as the interviewees in order to enable a kind of 'natural conversation' and proper mutual understanding. Besides general doubts on this last proposal, in the case of prisons it would not have been possible to apply such a method.
- 24 Using qualitative interview methods therefore can be a way of taking into account the inmates' perspective without needing to integrate inmates into the process of preparing questionnaires as Waldram (1998) did in order to 'empower' aboriginal inmates.
- 25 As it has been mentioned above when making the choice of the persons to be invited we had seen their offences on the list. However we were neither able to nor interested in remembering this information once we started the interviewing.
- 26 Such a promise however can cause ethical dilemmas if for different reasons (time, finding publisher, and teamwork) the publication of data takes time or is realised only partially.
- 27 For instance, one man wrote to us that in the course of the 8 years and 9 months since he has been imprisoned he had never received such a kind letter as we had sent him. He was supposed to spend another three years in prison for having killed his wife.
- 28 Thomas and Marquart point to the fact that researchers will have to decide whether to act honourably or ethically, i.e. to avoid shame or guilt: 'The relationship between proper behaviour and managing dirty information is paradoxical. [. . .] By definition, paradoxes have no ready solution' (1987: 91).

- 29 Thomas and Marquart (1987) discuss the difficulty of doing the right thing for every 'audience' mainly as far as the publication of information is concerned. They highlight that it is mostly impossible to make everyone happy. However, it is up to the researcher to decide what according to him/her the ethical or the honourable choice is. Waldram on the other hand argues that an anthropologist should take a stand and empower and protect vulnerable populations as for instance aboriginal inmates because of their lack of power (Waldram 1998). Based on our experiences the most important task of the researchers is to find a way to deal respectfully with the data collected based on trust obtained from informants' while at the same time writing a report without censorship and without sparing certain actors, but presenting results that are based on scientifically collected and analysed data.
- 30 See for similar experiences Liebling (1999: 160) who writes: 'We lived, albeit temporarily, in circumstances reminiscent of the prison experience – without easy access to telephones, away from our friends, cut off from our lives, and propelled into others' worlds, with all the consequences staff reported to us of prolonged detached duty'.

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