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# Interviews with Men Convicted of Rape: Reflections and Lessons of a Female Researcher in a Male Delhi Prison

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**Abstract:** Research involving prisoners is a vital source of information on crime but is often fraught with several challenges. This article presents an analysis of one of the first prison researches conducted in India with men convicted of rape. It examines and expands on the nuances of interacting with men convicted of rape and exploring a range of deeply personal questions with them. The research analysis attempts to highlight the impact of the researcher's positionality on offender accounts by also discussing social proximity and gender. This article contributes to the broader discourse around conducting qualitative research in prisons.

**Keywords:** India, offenders, interviews, qualitative research, prison, gender, reflection

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Prisons are sites of confinement that shape the everyday lived experiences of their inhabitants (Jefferson 2014), putting inmates in a unique position to provide a distinctive view of the criminal justice system and offending behaviours. Research investigating prisoner narratives and interviews has examined a number of areas such as the social and subjective environment of prisons, socialisation into prison values, forms of power, and violence (Cunha 2014). Given this diversity of approaches, interviewing within prisons has been suggested as a methodology in its own right (Liebling 2006).

Rigorous qualitative enquiry in prisons requires substantial practical and emotional commitment. The nature of knowledge construction means that it is often necessary to consider *who* is undertaking the research, with *whom*, and *where*. In this research,

data were collected by a female researcher from a sample of men convicted of rape serving sentences in Delhi Prison. The rationale was to examine the attitudes towards women and perceptions of culpability in men who had committed rape. This reflection paper, however, is an offshoot of a broader mixed-methods study (see Pandey 2018) and is written from a reflective point of view to capture some of the practical realities of doing research in prisons. The focus here is on the researcher's positionality, particularly the challenges of navigating semi-structured interviews with men convicted of rape with regard to *social proximity* and *gender*. The issues discussed in this paper are transferable and will be familiar to researchers and practitioners working with similar sensitive groups.

### **Prison research with men convicted of sexual offences**

Over the years, researchers have highlighted the challenges of conducting qualitative research with men convicted of sexual offences (Lee 1993; Cowburns 2005; Blagden, Pemberton 2010). One of the biggest challenges is perhaps to maintain the delicate balance of safeguarding the rights of research participants and considering public safety and future harm. Scully's (1990) research with men convicted of rape in a maximum-security prison in the United States puts in perspective the need to fulfil the obligations of the researcher when collecting information on past activities or future intentions. She proposes making '...a distinction between the researcher's obligation to an informant when information concerns past activities and when the information relates to a future act that poses danger to another person. In the latter case, protection of the endangered person takes precedence over the rights of the informant' (Scully 1990: 23). Lee (1993) supports this view and suggests:

'Insofar as there is a common thread in the literature it lies in the implicit assumption that some kinds of topics potentially involve a level of threat or risk to those studied which renders problematic the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data (Lee, Renzetti 1990). A simple definition of sensitive research would therefore be 'research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it'. Another way to put this is to say that sensitive topics present problems because research into them involves potential costs to those involved in the research, including, on occasion, the researcher.' (Lee 1993: 4)

Similarly, Cowburn's (2005) epistemological and ethical deliberations on working with men convicted of sexual offences provides a valuable discussion of the tensions in trying to get an unrestrained account of criminal behaviours while being conscious

of the boundary between confidentiality and public protection. He undertook his work from a pro-feminist standpoint which was based on a 'familiarity with feminist critiques of patriarchy and male power, reflexivity and a desire to change dominant forms of male behaviour' (Cowburn 2005: 59). In addition, his work also recognises the gendered nature of prison research, distinguishing between male-male and male-female dynamics, noting the possibility of the male researcher taking certain attitudes for granted and to some extent colluding with the male research participant in the case of male-male interactions and, by implication, doing the opposite in male-female interactions.

Blagden and Pemberton's (2010) experience of conducting qualitative research with men convicted of sexual offences provides a vital insight into the vulnerability of this group of men as well as the researcher and they note that '...researchers have also had to reconcile their own moral position as the building of rapport with research participants can sometimes lead to a genuine liking of that person' (Blagden and Pemberton 2010: 272). Blagden and Pemberton's work also emphasises the gendered nature of interactions with men convicted of sexual offences. For instance, the female researcher had to endure awkward situations, where prisoners shouted things through the window of the interview room and made complimentary remarks on her physical features, and a general discomfort during interviews in which participants shared their sexual fantasies. The male researcher on the other hand faced awkwardness due to masculinity, particularly when their personal values became the object of the interview. On the issue of gender in prison research, Willott's (1998) reflective work is particularly useful for understanding how researchers can remain committed to the feminist voice whilst delicately balancing the narratives of men convicted of sexual offences. Willott's (1998) strategies for employing epistemic reflexivity are not only unique, they are also crucial in guiding researchers like me (Henwood 2008).

A common thread in ethnographic prison literature is the manner in which scholars have been able to successfully retain their personal voices while sharing personal research challenges within prisons. Uglevik (2014: 3) argues that '[f]or many ethnographers, keeping the author visible in the text is not only a matter of academic style; it is a question of being true to a specific epistemology'. A similar sentiment has been expressed by Connell (2002), who feels that removing the author from the text sounds simple on paper but is, in fact, very difficult to do well in practice. Therefore, I have chosen to use a more personal style and in part have written the paper in a conversational tone, which has been dominating the field of qualitative prison research (Coffey 1999; Bhaktins 2003; Jewkes 2012; Uglevik 2014). There is a dearth of prison ethnographies emerging from India, particularly ones that would capture the narratives of men convicted of rape. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present my reflections on prison research by examining the impact of my positionality

on interviews with men convicted of rape in India. It seeks to explore and contribute to the international dialogue on conducting qualitative research with men convicted of sexual offences and highlight the importance of investigating the nature of the relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the research encounter, promoting reflexivity to explore the researcher's self-positioning.

## Methodology

The research methodology adopted for writing this paper is a critical reflection. Ever since the 'interpretive turn', reflexivity has largely been practised by qualitative researchers to authenticate research procedures (Mortari 2015). Personal notes and transcribed interviews were the main sources of data for this reflection. Critical theorists like Foucault (1990) believe in the unmasking of hegemonic assumptions in order to disrupt systems of class, race, and gender oppression. The critical reflection framework for this paper is also governed by hegemonic assumptions that highlight the historically and socially developed power relations of everyday life that are infused with coercive cultural values and forces of oppression.

The research setting was Delhi Prison (or Tihar Jail) in Delhi, India, run by the Department of Delhi Prisons under the Government of Delhi. It spans an area of about 400 acres. The research employed convenience sampling. Data collection for this research was conducted in various phases culminating in 2015. Before commencing the research, permission was obtained from the Director General of Prisons to conduct research inside the jail, following which the relevant approval documents were obtained from the Prison Law Officer in agreement with the prison psychologist. A risk assessment was conducted and ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Panel (FREP) of my host institution's Arts, Law and Social Sciences Faculty. Due to the sensitive nature of the type of participants and the information they were going to share, each participant was given a participant ID and no names were revealed during the data collection process. Participants were offered no financial or any other form of incentives for participation. The research adhered to the British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics (2015) and did not breach ethical standards in any way. The next section presents a reflective discussion of the impact of the researcher before highlighting the explicit role of *social proximity* and *gender*.

## The impact of the researcher

In qualitative research, since data are mediated and interpreted through the researcher rather than through inventories or machines, it is important to consider the role of the researcher as an instrument of data collection (Lincoln, Denzin 2003). To fulfil this role,

consumers of qualitative research need to know about the ‘human instrument’ – the characteristics of the researcher herself (Greenbank 2003). This is where positionality comes into the picture. As Hall (1990: 18) puts it: ‘There’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all’. Positionality represents a space where objectivism and subjectivism converge. While one can try to remain objective, we must always be mindful of our subjectivities, and that is the nature of positionality (Freire 2000). In order to capture my experiences, a research journal was actively maintained, which documented my personal reactions and reflections and insights into the self and the past in relation to the research. Note taking is an effective qualitative research strategy (Lune, Berg 2016) and I found it to be extremely helpful in my own research process. As outlined by Wolfinger (2002), a researcher may be able to take notes while they are in the field and many experts also advocate this practice (Schatzman, Strauss 1973; Lofland, Lofland 1984; Berg 1989; Goffman 1989; Emerson et al. 1995). Generally, these initial notes help form a logical structure when the researcher sits down at the end of the day to reflect on their progress and practice.

I have also wondered if my role as a researcher was ‘emic’ – that of an insider who was a full participant in the activity, programme, or phenomenon – or more ‘etic’ – an outside view, more of an objective viewer (Creswell 1994). In anthropology, ‘the emic approach investigates how local people think’ (Kottak 2006: 47), which was also the rationale behind my research to understand how the convicted prisoners made sense of their life and offending. Sometimes I was an active participant in the interactions and briefly felt like an insider because of my repeated visits and familiarity and contact with the prisoners and members of staff. However, visits over a short period of time cannot in any way resemble a prison sentence and it is impossible to truly comprehend and appreciate the nuances of a particular culture unless one resides within that culture (Olive 2014). Irrespective of my numerous visits to the prison, I could never really be an insider as long as I had the freedom to electively enter and leave the prison, unlike my incarcerated participants. This was also noted by Stevens (2012: 530), who felt that her research in therapeutic community prisons had been ‘semi-ethnographic in recognition that it is impossible for any “free-world” researcher to become completely immersed in, or truly experience the realities of, the prison’. Therefore, most often, the researcher’s perspective within social sciences is associated with an *etic* perspective, as it involves using ‘structures and criteria developed outside the culture as a framework for studying the culture’ (Willis et al. 2007: 100). Gomez and Granja (2021) also noted the insider-outsider challenge in their prison research in Portugal. They argue that prisons are low-trust environments grappling with continuous and complex power shifts which can make establishing trust a difficult task and ‘becoming an insider, an impossible one’ (Gomez, Granja 2021: 3). Bucerius (2013), however, has made the interesting suggestion

that instead of trying to be an 'insider', a more helpful position would be to become a 'trusted outsider'.

While discussing positionality, Merriam et al. (2001) argue that reflecting on the insider/outsider status with regard to one's positionality (such as class, gender, culture, etc.) can offer a better understanding of the dynamics of doing research within and across one's culture. My positionality was of a female researcher affiliated with a British university and from an upper-middle-class Brahmin<sup>1</sup> family. Throughout this article, my research experiences will reveal multiple positionalities and their subsequent impact on the research interviews.

## Social proximity

According to Bourdieu et al. (1999), the social distance between the researcher and participants can be problematical because of the tendency to view those who belong to a different social group as more inhibited and influenced by their condition than they really are. For instance, participants may be hesitant to divulge information to people perceived as a member of an oppressive group (Miller, Glassner 1997). This was somewhat the case in this research, as the construction of my role commenced as soon as I stepped inside the jail. It is important to note that anyone who goes inside the jail is accompanied by a figure of authority; thus, the very first impression a researcher produces is most often that of an outsider with power and connections (Marzano 2007). For instance, in some of my interviews the participants referred to me as '*madam*' and viewed me as an authority figure:

*MP: Okay, so can you tell me how you came to Delhi?*

*P: Madam, as I was telling you, I used to play a lot of sports, so my cousin sent a letter for me from Rashtrapati Bhavan [President House] to apply for the position of a guard.*

A new and unfamiliar female face on male prison grounds does not go unnoticed and, at the same time, there is no way to control the widespread awareness of this new presence and the effect it has on the interviews, both positively and negatively. The participants who were interviewed first were likely to tell the others what they experienced; therefore, it was important to make sure that the participants had

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, India's caste system, a complex ordering of social groups, included four principal varnas or large caste categories. The Brahmins (priests and teachers) at the top, followed by the Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (laborers and artisans). A fifth category fell outside the varna system and consists of those known as 'untouchables' or Dalits.

a positive interview experience. Like in most social set ups, making a good first impression was also a priority here.

Explaining to the participants that the researcher has no affiliation with any national, state, or local correctional or justice system is important and necessary early on in the interview process (Schlosser 2008). King (2000: 300) discussed how '[o]ne of the most difficult aspects of prisons research is to find a convincing and acceptable research role'. This issue has been highlighted in prison research literature by many scholars (Giallombardo 1966; Jacobs 1974; King, Elliot 1978; Sparks et al. 1996; Liebling 1999). Researchers have to define their role to the participants, as this is vital in a prison setting where levels of trust are generally low (Liebling, and Arnold 2004). This was done at the very beginning of my interviews because some of the participants thought that I was 'important', as I was allowed into the prison to talk to them, and that by discussing their stories with me it would help their case in some way. One such interaction with a participant is illustrated below:

*MP: So, should we start?*

*P: Madam, will this help me? I have re-appealed my case in high court. Can you help with that?*

*MP: This information is only for my research; I am unfortunately not in a position to help you legally in any way.*

*P: You are not a lawyer?*

*MP: No, I am a researcher.*

This was also observed by Ugelvik (2014) during his prison research in Oslo. Many of her prisoners initially looked at her as a 'puppet of the prison system' (Ugelvik 2014: 474). Power dynamics within the prison can be witnessed in even the most mundane situations – my saying yes to a glass of lemonade being offered by a member of prison staff usually meant that the prisoner would have to prepare it. As noted by Rowe (2014), irrespective of the internal discomfort of the researcher, one cannot interfere in the institutional power dynamics through which the prisoners are managed.

Having access to authority within the prison can be useful to obtain protection if necessary, but it can also intimidate or scare participants into silence (Schlosser 2008). One of my participants spoke very softly as he didn't want the security guard placed outside the interview room to overhear him. In his interview, when asked about life in jail he said:

*P: It is not as smooth as it looks. Last week my brother was stabbed in his cell as someone had given the orders from outside! It was a personal fight that had taken place outside the prison and he died inside. It was in the newspaper. We*





*are not that safe here, you know. Sometimes even the guards know but they look the other way.*

This interview took place a week after the said incident made headlines in national newspapers reporting on gangs operating inside the jail. An article in *The Hindu* (2015) with the headline 'Another Tihar Inmate Stabbed to Death' explained how the National Human Rights Commission had sent a notice to the Director General of Prisons that there were about 20 inmate gangs operating in the jail. While prisoners may not conceptualise the orders and rules enforced by prison officials as being in their best interests, they are aware that compliance will in the long run help them inside the prison (Schlosser 2008). Another participant said in his interview:

*P: Life is easy in here as long as you follow the rules and behave well. At the end of the day, you have to spend a long time [inside] and you don't want to make enemies with other inmates or get into the bad books of the staff.*

*MP: Bad books?*

*P: You don't want to get noticed for the wrong things and get known as a troublemaker.*

While some participants responded to me as a figure of authority, others tried to appeal to me as a young research student. With regard to helping his own daughter who was in her final year of high school, we had the following exchange:

*MP: How are the children managing on their own?*

*P: The situation in my house is very bad. There is darkness and nothing else. My children, especially my younger daughter is in the middle of studying for exams, but there is no electricity. They cannot afford to pay the bills alone. Even though the government has introduced so many schemes for girls for their education and progress, but what can a poor man do if he cannot even afford electricity – how will a child study in the darkness? You are also a student, madam, you know the importance of education. I also want my daughter to do well and excel, but I am helpless. I will be very grateful if you could help her in anyway whatsoever. You can take her phone number.*

Though an outsider, I was still a young Indian woman who understood the value of good education and some of the older participants tried to connect with this aspect of my identity, feeling free to discuss their personal struggles in providing for their children and their future. The attempts I made to stick to my 'researcher/student identity' and to constantly re-position myself within some of the complex interactions

felt largely instinctive. Sometimes I also managed to surprise participants as I had a fair understanding of the prison layout, having previously interviewed some of the inmates in a different jail within the complex during my pilot study.<sup>2</sup> For instance, one of the participants seemed excited to learn that I knew some of the prison terms, areas, and people, as highlighted by the excerpt below:

*MP: Do you talk to your family regularly?*

*P: Yes, I talk to them on the phone from time to time and they even come to meet me.*

*MP: So, you must be going to the Mulakat Ghar [Meeting Room] to see them?*

*P: Yes, you know where that is?*

*MP: Yes, once you cross the 'Deodi' [the courtyard in front of the prison entrance] and go out, it's a small space on the left side, near the parking.*

*P: Yes, yes. It is very small though.*

*MP: Yes, I agree. The stool was very uncomfortable the last time I was there.*

*P: [Laughs softly and nods in agreement] They are planning to replace them soon.*

Familiarity with the prison helped break the ice with the participants and in some ways diminished the social distance. Through this familiarity I was able to share with participants my awareness of some aspects of their lives within the prison. Another enthusiastic dialogue took place as we discussed a participant's work in the prison emporium:

*P: I work here in the jail. I have learnt to paint and now I make paintings.*

*MP: It's wonderful, all the work that goes on in the creative room.*

*P: Have you been there? That's where we learn and do most of our work.*

*MP: Yes, I have been there and seen some people live in action, drawing beautifully!*

*P: Many of my paintings have been sold as well. I have a fixed salary of 3000 rupees per month and if my work is sold I get additional money.*

*MP: That's great. I have seen a lot of stunning work in Tihar Haat. I picked up a painting from there myself.*

*P: They have a cafeteria there now, too. Did you try it?*

*MP: Yes, I actually did. They sell delicious food and it's very cheap! [Giggles] I told many people about it.*

*P: [Smiles] Yes, it's subsidised.*

<sup>2</sup> The pilot study included a sample of men convicted of rape who were asked to fill out the Multicultural Masculinity Ideology Scale (MMIS) by Doss (1998) and participate in short interviews.

In the above narrative, expressions of ‘giggling’ and ‘smiles’ were noted as signs of social comfort. According to Scott, Lavan, Chen and McGettigan (2015), laughter is a social emotion, occurring most often in interactions in which it is associated with bonding, agreement, affection, and emotional regulation. In society, people are often judged by their facial expressions and a smile is believed to be an indication of intelligence and competence, inner reflections, and thoughts and emotions (Slavkin 1999). Similarly, one can set the mood for a social situation and convey intent through smiling. Psychologists have noted giggling and shy smiles as signs of coping with anxiety by observing body tension, social discomfort, and facial expressions (Zhe and Nickerson 2007; Chen et al. 2010; Minahan 2014). In this case, I’d like to believe that these non-verbal cues indicated both anxiety on the part of the participant and decreased social distance to some degree.

In some interactions, it was clear that the participants were also taking an interest in my class and my caste – in particular, the stark contrast between my life experiences and their own. For instance:

*P: It must be so nice in England. It looks very beautiful in the movies we have seen.*

*MP: Yes, it is quite nice, but it rains a lot!*

*P: So, it is better only madam, better than the hot days here with no rains.*

*Farmers cannot even have a good harvest and everyone keeps waiting for the monsoons.*

*MP: That is true. But I feel that Delhi is just as good as London, you know.*

*P: For us also, coming from a village, Delhi only feels like a foreign country. Life is so different and modern. Are you also from Delhi?*

*MP: Originally, my family is from Uttrakhand – Kumaon, but my grandfather settled here and we have been in Delhi since.*

*P: Oh, so you are Pahadi Brahmin ‘Pandey’.*

In such conversations, I could feel the participant evaluating my relative privilege and education as a result of belonging to an upper class and caste in India. It would also have been clear that my experiences of urban life would certainly have been of no help in surviving and flourishing in the hinterland and in the kind of subcultures that some of these men had grown up in. Therefore, another aspect of social proximity that is likely to have impacted the way participants interacted with me is my ‘non-offender’ outsider identity. This may have suggested to the participants the need to tell a story of reform or to appeal to a ‘non-offender’ status in their narratives, and, indeed, very few participants gave me an account in which they condoned their offence. For example, when asked about their perceptions of culpability, one of the participants said:

*P: First of all, I would like to say that I have not raped anyone. Yes, I am convicted under IPC 376, but I did not do anything.*

Prisons are hierarchical and relatively low-trust environments, where constant efforts are made to manage impressions (Goffman 1959). Stigmatised individuals such as inmates tend to ‘cover’ or hide certain aspects of themselves because of the societal inclination to pass moral judgement and thus define their identities for them (Ware, Marshall, Marshall 2015; Goffman 1963; Garfinkel 1956). Gudmundsdottir (1996: 303–304) believes that as researchers seeking to understand how inmates construct their realities and social relations ‘we listen to their words, and try to reconstruct their meaning in our minds, but we can never be sure about the accuracy of these transformations’. In this regard, the participants would have also felt compelled to present a non-offender persona to escape the judgements, stigma, and stereotypes associated with criminals and criminality in Indian society. In the case of men convicted of rape, this can also be attributed to the sudden rise of interest in rape as a social issue in India since the Delhi gang-rape case of 2012.<sup>3</sup> It was clear that men convicted of rape were keener to highlight their experiences inside the prison as mere rule-abiding ‘inmates’ as opposed to their accounts of sexual offending in order to reject the label of ‘rapist’. Such encounters also provided an insight into the caution and pragmatism with which people inside prisons navigate their everyday lives (Rowe 2014).

As Presser (2010) has pointed out, every narrative has an audience that shapes what is told. So, while I may have had an impact on what was conveyed to me, this in no way discredits the interview but, in fact, makes it more pertinent to examine why these men may have tried to distance themselves from their offending to present a non-offender view. More specifically, this related to exchanges that underlined other aspects of their life, particularly those outside the context of the offence. They were talking to someone who was an outsider to criminal offending and the prison environment and thus they also wanted to highlight their pre-sentence, non-offender self or their post-sentence life inside the jail. This would also explain why when I was arranging the contents of the interviews according to size (time spent) from most

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<sup>3</sup> A 23-year-old girl was gang-raped on a moving bus in Delhi and subsequently died in December 2012. Since then, the increased debates about sexual violence in India, the public outcry, and the call for the death penalty, coupled with the lack of research on convicted sex offenders (particularly men who commit rape), have led to this group of offenders being demonised and accorded a somewhat ‘extraordinary’ status. There were many such instances where the men I interviewed distanced themselves from their own behaviour in order to avoid labels associated with sexual offending. This also led to one of the key findings of the broader research: all the men convicted of rape referred to themselves as ‘kaidi’, or ‘inmates’ in English, during the interviews, as opposed to men convicted of murder, who referred to themselves as ‘gunhegar’ or ‘offenders’ in English (see Pandey 2018).

to least, 'involvement in crime' was sandwiched between 'remembering childhood/ personal attachments' and 'reflections and future aspirations'.

On the other hand, not being a member of the same social group can also have advantages. Miller and Glassner (1997) have suggested that participants have the opportunity to feel like an 'expert' and to 'teach' someone who in their eyes occupies a more powerful position. Some of my participants appeared to enjoy the occasions where they had a chance to educate me about aspects of their life outside of prison, as highlighted through my interaction with one of the participants:

*MP: Tell me more about your life in the village.*

*P: In the village life is different. People in the city will never understand the complexities involved, madam.*

*MP: What kind of complexities?*

*P: Sometimes you take money from relatives or friends when you need help. They initially loan you the money, but later things also get ugly. No one is that rich that they forget about the money you owe them. Even with the fields, let me tell you that more money goes into maintaining a piece of land and getting the seeds and khada than the money you actually make after selling the crop.*

*MP: What is the meaning of 'khada'?*

*P: You know – compost... fertilisers.*

*MP: Oh like 'khad' in Hindi. Okay.*

*P: Yes, that's not cheap at all, and for a big field you have to buy it in large quantities.*

*P: [Smiles] Do you know how long it takes to till a field? We have to do it by hand and it takes a lot of strength. The soil has to be prepared accordingly.*

Often, as a function of social distance, interviewees may assume that researchers know nothing they know or have a different kind of knowledge, and as a result they elaborate on ideas that normally – within the context of the participants' own social group – would be taken for granted (Miller, Glassner 1997). Furthermore, the researcher's lack of a shared understanding with the participant may also lead the researcher to ask supplementary questions to clarify or qualify statements that a member from within the interviewee's group would have understood. Assuming that I had no knowledge of the difficulties that farmers face in villages, this participant was eager to share what he had learnt from his experience of farming the land back in his village. While sometimes the information was less relevant to the research (like in the excerpt above), the participants were, however, able to feel like they had more power in contributing to the interview, and this shift was evidenced through changes in their tone and body language during such exchanges.

Furthermore, participants acted very differently in relation to social distance. Some went to great lengths to explain what they wanted to convey, while others seemed much less worried that I might not understand them. Upon clarification, however, they often gave an elaborate explanation of the issue at hand. For instance, some of the participants did not willingly describe their victims in detail, and only when asked to talk more about the victim did they divulge their characteristics. Bourdieu et al. (1999) also suggest that the majority of research encounters lie anywhere between the two extremes of perfect social proximity (where near total rapport is generated) and total distance (where a relationship of trust and understanding breaks down or cannot emerge). My position was closer to the middle ground of this continuum, where because of the rapport established between us, participants were made to feel comfortable enough to engage in a conversation, and it seemed that most of the men, if not all, trusted me enough to at least speak about certain aspects of their personal life and offending. Therefore, like Willott (1998), I, too, was able to gain enough trust from my participants for them to disclose information about their lives and take risks in their interactions with me.

## Gender

Another, and the most crucial, aspect of my identity that inevitably had an impact, although quite differently in different interviews, was the fact that I was a young woman (a 22-year-old at the time), who was interviewing men convicted of rape. As mentioned above, role construction begins as soon as one enters the prison. I must admit that growing up in the world's second most populous capital city, I was no stranger to the male gaze. However, it was upon my entry into the male prison that I realised how exaggerated this male gaze can be. It has been argued that 'looking' greatly impacts the development of female subjectivity, particularly given that being 'looked at' leads to a heightened sense of self-awareness, which gets contextualised within gender relations (Clark 2018; Riley, Evans, Mackiewicz 2016). Objectification theory argues that women internalise an observer's perspective as the primary view when developing an understanding of themselves and their bodies (Roberts, Calogero, Gervais 2018). The male gaze within the prison setup and among men convicted of rape most certainly added to my existing apprehensions and self-consciousness. Therefore, as the days passed, I found myself, in some respects, fortifying my femininity to 'blend' more easily into the prison setup, under what Crewe (2014) refers to as an 'omni-optical' male gaze.

Overall, I noted in my observations that men convicted of rape felt uncomfortable when they were asked about their crime and the victim. This was evidenced through their body language and lack of eye contact. In Blagden and Pemberton's (2010)

research, Pemberton (a female researcher) experienced certain awkward situations where prisoners shouted things through the window of the interview room, along with a general discomfort during the interviews in which the participants shared their sexual fantasies. I endured some of the same discomfort, due, however, to the prison's structural layout (the interview room was close to the Deputy-Superintendent's office), as while no one shouted things into the room and it was more or less a quiet setting, the 'quietness' certainly added to the awkwardness felt by both my participants and me when discussing intimate topics such as sexual preferences and habits. Almost all the men convicted of rape attempted to describe the events of a sexual nature in a very sophisticated and verbally 'appropriate' manner. This effort seemed more pronounced in some of the older participants, who demonstrated almost 'protective' and paternalistic behaviour. For example, in my notes on one of the participants who was a 47-year-old man convicted of raping his step-daughter, I wrote:

*The participant's body language seems very similar to that of my own father [who is also in the same age range]. He is not making much eye contact and is feeling a bit uncomfortable while describing what transpired between him and the victim [who is his step-daughter] as the nature of the conversation is sexual. He is trying to describe things as discreetly and 'appropriately' as possible. He says his daughter was in bed with him in 'nagnavastha' [meaning 'nakedness' in English]. He could have said she was 'nangi' [meaning 'naked/without clothes' in English] as this is a more widely and commonly used term. However, he chose a more 'sophisticated' and less crude word to describe her state and his situation.*

Considering the severity of a sexual crime such as rape, it cannot be described 'appropriately'; however, appropriateness here means that the participants were trying to give details of the crime in a way that would not offend me or come across as crude.

In a similar vein, there were attempts to appeal to my experiences as a young Indian woman and to aspects that established our shared culture. For example, a participant convicted of raping his daughter said:

*P: Tell me, isn't it the job of parents to be strict with their children when we feel like they may be going down the wrong path? Or to enquire about their activities – if you are up all night talking to someone or always acting suspiciously with your phone. I didn't give my daughter a mobile phone, so naturally when I see her using it I am bound to ask where she got it from, right? Every sensible parent will ask and enquire. I am sure your parents also asked about your whereabouts and monitored your behaviour.*

The wider context of this excerpt was that he was a single father who believed that it was his daughter's plan all along to put him behind bars because he was opposing her marriage. He blamed the daughter's boyfriend for corrupting her by giving her expensive gifts such as a phone and dresses. This is not uncommon, as gender role differentials intensify and widen during adolescence (Mensch, Bruce, Greene 1998), when boys start to enjoy new privileges reserved for men, such as autonomy, mobility, and opportunity, whereas girls endure more restrictions, with their parents curtailing their mobility, monitoring their interactions with males, and in some cases even withdrawing them from school (Bruce, Lloyd, Leonard 1995). In my notes on this participant I wrote:

*The participant portrays himself as a helpless father who did nothing wrong other than simply doing his duty as a parent. I find myself sympathising with him and, at times, see reflections of my own father's behaviour during my teenage years.*

As Jewkes (2012: 65) and others (e.g. Hunt 1989) have noted, our subjective experiences shape 'every aspect of the research process from choice of project to presentation of "findings" whether consciously or unconsciously so'. In other words, the emotions that we experience during the research process may help us better understand ourselves.

While intensive interview settings necessitate a certain extent of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, when women interview men these can also often become subject to gendered performances (e.g. McKee, O'Brien 1983; Gurney 1985; Williams, Heikes 1993; Campbell 2003). On the other hand, Crewe (2006) and Liebling (1999) noted that male prisoners are more likely to disclose emotions to women than to men. This was clearly evident in some of my interviews. While all interviews consisted of emotional moments, some men felt vulnerable enough to go so far as to cry, at which point I had to stop the interview process temporarily in order to provide appropriate support, which involved offering a glass of water, passing them a tissue, and allowing them to take a break to settle down again.

*MP: Anything else you would like to say?*

*P: I am a kaidi [inmate] here, madam, but I often think about how it has become so easy for people to take advantage of the new/stricter sexual violence rules that the government has now put in place. All it takes is for a woman to accuse a man and they take her word. That's not fair and anyone can use it out of spite or for revenge. My life is completely ruined [long pause], it has fallen apart and more than anyone my children are suffering [deep breath, hold back tears].*

*\*continues\**



*I feel so good after talking to you, feel light in my chest [breaks down and cries]. I wish we could talk to someone like this more often and share our story and emotions.*

*P: I want to thank you [sniffles]! You came here and spoke to me and listened. I hope I can talk to someone like this again. You are my daughter's age so I can only give you my blessings to succeed in your studies.*

Crying is a powerful and compelling form of human emotional expression. There are many psychoanalytic theories for adult crying that include crying as a symbolic regression to an intrauterine state (Helibrunn 1955), crying as a compensatory defence against other internal drives such as aggression and sexual energy (Lofgren 1966; Sachs 1973), and tears as reflecting emotions and feelings that cannot be worked off in action and thus help with coping (Bindra 1972). Building on Bindra's (1972) views, Frijda (1986) also considered crying as a sign of powerlessness, wherein the individual wants to surrender, as they are unable to cope adequately with a taxing situation. Frijda (1997) further points out how crying can induce sympathy, empathy, and comfort while also strengthening mutual bonds between people. However, crying can also sometimes be perceived as a form of blackmail (Frijda 1997). While exploring the social aspects of crying, Cornelius (1982) challenged the commonly held assumption that crying is a completely involuntary activity and argued that in some instances crying should be regarded as (even unconsciously) manipulative, as it helps improve situations and relationships. As the above excerpt shows, some of the men found sharing their life story and talking about their crime helpful as a way to unburden themselves. Mills and Wooster (1987: 125) describe crying as 'a vital part of a healing or growing process, that should not be hindered' and Solter (1995) characterises it as an inborn healing mechanism.

In other interviews, the male-female dynamic meant that there was a definite tension resembling the start of a relationship or flirtation. One of my participants was well educated and the only one who spoke to me in English. My interaction with him was the longest – 1 hour and 25 minutes (as opposed to the average 50 mins). He expressed how he felt a connection with me and found himself sharing things he had not shared with anyone before. Several months after the interview, he also wrote an email saying that he got my contact through the Information Sheet and felt that he should write to give me an update about his life as he was out on parole. While this was not a proposal, a somewhat related male-female dynamic was also noted by Crowley (2007) and Ezzy (2010), who both described how interview participants invited them out. However, neither Crowley or Ezzy took any responsibility for this outcome or examined why this might have happened; they only recorded that they 'politely declined' these invitations.

While this research did not include a deeper analysis of this dynamic, it did note a few points that may explain this forward behaviour from the male prisoners. First, it should be understood that as researchers we demand high levels of intimacy from qualitative interviews (Schinkel 2014). Furthermore, these interactions feel most intimate when the participant is genuinely reflecting on their life and motives, making the interview a self-observation (Enosh, Buchbinder 2005). Participants reveal much of themselves and often feel 'successful' after an interaction in which they were able to participate fully (Birch, Miller 2000). It can therefore be argued that in this regard the best interviews almost resemble the intense conversations that take place at the beginning of a new relationship. The researcher displays levels of interest in the participant, then probes and demands information on highly personal matters and generally reacts positively to whatever information is shared by the participant.

Liebling (2001: 475) recommends affective presence and engagement – 'openness, warmth, "devotion" to the task, the capacity to be sympathetic' – as central to good research and stresses the researcher's need to alternate between multiple sympathies, without compromising their objectivity. The researcher's ability to inhabit this seeming contradiction between making genuine affective bonds with her research subjects and, simultaneously, recognising their temporal, transient, and affect-laden nature is perhaps aided by the knowledge of her role as a mediator in this very process. Although no 'inappropriate' proposals were made at the end of any of my interviews, I did feel sympathetic towards some of the participants who had engaged in very open and honest conversations. For instance, my interview with one of the participants ended with him inviting me to visit the bakery so that he could show me the jail factory and offer me some of the fresh cookies he made. Since I had already been to the baking unit, I politely thanked him and declined at the time. However, on my concluding day in the prison, after finishing my last interview, I did visit the factory to say goodbye to him. He was happy to see me and gave me a box of fresh cookies as a 'parting' gift.

On other occasions, when participants strayed away from the main narrative or the question, I sometimes did not direct them back as I felt almost compelled to hear what they wanted to share, even if at times it was not relevant to the study. Similarly, while I did make it clear that I was not in any legal position to help the men, when some of the men urged me to help them or their family (in some non-legal way), I did spend a considerable amount of time at the end of the interview discussing their grievances and later, after exiting the prison, contemplated ways in which I could provide support. Needless to say, the intense interactions with the prisoners and my subsequent struggle with positionality also required some emotional decompressing at the end of the day, for which I often relied on my research journal and friends and family.

## Conclusion

This paper was written with the intention of providing some critical insights into prison research and, particularly, into the experience of interviewing men convicted of sexual offences, highlighting some of the challenges that this kind of enquiry poses. It presents the perspective of a female researcher in a male-dominated and highly punitive environment, discussing gendered and socially distant relationships with men convicted of rape. Liebling et al.'s (1998) observation of the role of personal curiosity in directing the researcher towards the eventual setting and particular context is prescient in light of the motivation behind this study. As a woman who was born and brought up in India's capital city, the Delhi gang rape case of 2012 piqued my curiosity to examine accounts of sexual offending. My standpoint for this research was influenced by feminist analysis of patriarchal systems, male privilege, gender norms, and male sexual dominance. This standpoint was critical in understanding how men convicted of rape were not just 'monsters' or a special group of 'deviant' individuals, and that rather their sexual behaviours can be placed on a continuum of sexual violence as identified by Kelly (1988).

The relationship between the social environment and researcher is an iterative one. Navigating the structures, social hierarchies, and relationships of the prison, I had to negotiate my positionality through different social dynamics. My personal view of the offenders' crime and sentence did not overshadow the interview process, although my critical stance did motivate me to look for explanations and probe the participants on certain topics. While my positionality as an outsider impacted my interaction with the participants, it led to some valuable insights which helped in the analysis of the data and eventually made me feel like a 'trusted outsider'.

Reflecting on personal experiences can be quite enlightening, especially for those who are just launching their prison research journeys. Sometimes it is difficult to ascertain whether one's approach includes reflexivity. Does my research here in fact represent an example of reflexivity? I would say yes, if we accept Callaway's (1992: 33) definition of reflexivity as 'a continuing mode of self-analysis', and that efforts such as this paper are a part of the same research process. Moreover, Cunliffe (2003) believes that it is almost necessary for prison researchers to increase their reflexivity. My view, based on the reflections outlined here, is that it might be appropriate to understand reflexivity as a way of holding a mirror up to your research process and analysing and retracing your steps to explore the nuances of your practice. Reflexivity involves self-exploration, a journey through which the researcher can gain awareness of the relationship between different identities, participants, and the body of knowledge (Chiseri-Stater 1996; Pillow 2003). In line with Schlosser's (2006) appeal, I, too, hope that more research scholars new to

the field of researching convicted sex offenders will share their experiences and research practices with the wider community.

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