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Using multimodal methods to explore groups with multifaceted roles: The case of Prison Officers

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which creative, multimodal methods are well-suited to research with groups holding multifaceted roles within complex systems. The potential benefits of using imaginative methods in qualitative inquiry will be discussed in relation to the participants, organisation and researcher. The first author's ongoing doctoral project is discussed, which employs a creative, multimodal method combining vlogs and interviews for data collection to explore prison officers' (POs) emotional experiences of their complex work roles. The PO role is multifaceted and requires the balancing of competing demands, such as discipline and rehabilitation, within the complex prison environment. Given the intricacies of the PO role and prison system, the question of why multimodal methods are particularly well-suited to research with this group shall be explored. The article will begin with an overview of the complexities of the PO experience, and then consider how multimodal methods might address these multiplicities.

1. Complex roles in complex environments: The prison officer

Prison is a complex institution, acting as a separate and marginalised space (Cohen & Taylor, 1972) with its own culture and rules requiring acculturation of both imprisoned individuals (DeValiant et al., 2018; Leibling & Maruna, 2005) and prison officers (POs) (Crawley, 2004). Institutional aims add further complexity by seeking to balance security and disciplinary goals with rehabilitative and therapeutic outcomes. These tensions have led researchers to explore the dynamics involved in negotiating the therapeutic process within counter-therapeutic environments, highlighting the challenges for criminal justice system (CJS) professionals like mental-health practitioners and POs in attempting to meet the needs of both individuals and the system (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Vossler et al., 2017; Ward, 2012).

The PO role requires engagement with incarcerated individuals' rehabilitation including addressing offending behaviour and promoting prosocial attitudes. This means POs

hold varied work roles including both custodian and treatment-provider, balancing disciplinary approaches with therapeutic aims (Braggins & Talbot, 2006; House of Commons, 2008; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017). Research highlights experiences of ‘role conflict’ or difficulties faced by POs attempting to balance these broad, often competing approaches (Bond & Gemmell, 2014; Guthrie, Smillie, McKeown & Bainbridge, 2018) and suggests these conflicts have multiple negative repercussions including emotional labour, burn-out, custody orientation and increased punitive or hostile attitudes towards prisoners (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Nylander et al., 2011; Poole & Regoli, 1980; Schaufeli, Wilmar & Peeters, 2000).

Role conflicts are shown to impact incarcerated individuals and overall prison efficacy as they shape daily interactions and relationships between POs and those incarcerated. These relationships are a key element to the success and security of the prison environment. Fairness, respect and legitimacy within prison environments and staff–prisoner relationships are shown to affect order (Sparks & Bottoms, 2008) and prisoner violence (McGuire, 2018); and empathic treatment of incarcerated individuals is linked to enhanced security (Dunbar & Langdon, 1998). These relationships are also vital to improving incarcerated individual’s psychological wellbeing and reducing recidivism (Guthrie et al., 2018; Home Office, 1984; Leibling, 2011; Leibling, Durie, Stiles & Tait 2005) as highlighted by the ‘Every Contact Matters’ initiative, which focused on the importance of all interactions between staff and those incarcerated (National Offenders Management Service, 2014). It is therefore highly important to explore facilitation of PO welfare by better understanding the complex dynamics of their work towards offering more effective, individually-tailored support and training.

1.2 Emotional research with prison officers

There is a lack of research on the day-to-day working lives (Leibling, Price & Shefer, 2011) and affective experiences of POs (Arnold, 2005) and what would constitute adequate training and support for this group (Leibling et al., 2011). POs engage in ‘low visibility’ work (Leibling et al., 2011), and so are a group whose individual needs are prone to be under-acknowledged and underexplored. This low visibility was highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis, where there was a plethora of media, political and public support and empathy for key-workers but with little acknowledgment of POs. Crawley (2004) found many POs believe they are undervalued by the public and not considered as on par with other public service workers.

While there have been empathic approaches taken to exploring POs role, such as Leibling et al. (1999) who used ‘appreciative inquiry’ to allow POs to focus on positive and

affirming rather than problem-orientated aspects of their work, and research exploring the emotional aspects of prison work (Arnold, 2005; Crawley, 2004), there remains a lack of research exploring POs on a personal, emotional level.

Creative methods also remain neglected in research with POs, with much literature favouring useful but conservative methods of data collection such as interviews, focus-groups and case-study (Arnold, 2005; Bond & Gemmell, 2014; Nylander et al., 2011). However, Crawley (2004) recognised that devices such as analogies and metaphors may be helpful for exploring how POs understand and approach their work. This research gap is highly relevant as using creative methods allows for approaches which may resonate or seem more relatable to participants compared to conservative methods, therefore offering the potential for richer personal expression and subsequent data.

Discussing mixed methods, Mason (2006, p.13) suggested that researcher understanding of multidimensional experience may be diminished if phenomena is viewed “along a single dimension”. Researchers need to think creatively and “multi-dimensionally” rather than conservatively when engaging with methods, and methodological creativity should incorporate non-verbal dimensions, such as the visual or the sensory, to gain a richer understanding of experiences as it is lived.

Using creative, multimodal methods can mirror more closely individuals’ everyday means of engagement with the world, which encompasses multiple methods of meaning-making and expression (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Research suggests there are limitations to exploring individual lived experiences using language alone (Pink, 2007; Radley, 2009) and it is important for qualitative researchers to acknowledge that a variety of modalities form an individual’s experience of the world (Reavey & Prosser, 2012). The prevalent use of emerging technologies in contemporary society attests to the variety of mediums available for individuals to explore the world and represent their lived experiences. Visual images and technology have become an important means for individuals to express emotions and communicate (Reavey & Prosser, 2012). It is therefore vital for researchers to also “engage with these everyday forms of communication and representation” (Reavey & Johnson, 2008, p.10).

This article will explore the first author’s ongoing doctoral project, which will use a creative, multimodal methodological approach to explore POs’ emotional experiences of their multifaceted work roles. The project method uses i) vlogging and interviews; ii) multiple vlogging mediums; and iii) creative, multimodal recruitment tools. The article will use these methodological ideas to discuss why this type of method is particularly well-suited to research

with POs, and will explore its potential benefits for the participants, organisation and researcher.

2. The research project

The first author's doctoral project will explore POs' emotional experiences of their multifaceted work roles, and the personal meanings they attach to these experiences. The project aims to provide insight into the nature, meaning and interactions of these roles towards improved staff welfare, practice and support. Ethical approvals have been granted from the host university and HMPPS (Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) National Research Committee. The project is now moving onto the recruitment phase.

There will be approximately 30 participants depending on PO recruitment response. They will be i) full or part-time POs; ii) have worked as POs for over 6 months (full-time) or 1 year (part-time); iii) working with adult offenders; and iv) have access to a phone with photo and video functions. Recruitment will be conducted via a video featuring the researcher and accompanying cartoon animation, which will be used to visually explain the project's purposes and participation details. The video and an accompanying information sheet will be sent to HMPPS and shown to POs.

2.1 Project design

Participants will be asked to create a series of reflexive vlogs on their phones over two weeks. Vlogging will take place outside of workplaces and hours to help reduce resource and security burdens for HMPPS, and to more fully situate participation within the individual's everyday life. There is no set number of entries required as participants are asked to reflect on experiences as they naturally occur. Participants will be asked to reflect on their personal, emotional experiences of the different aspects of their work roles and choose media items that they feel represent or symbolise these emotions and experiences.

Vlogs will include different media types, either found or created, such as i) songs or general audio i.e: sounds, recorded speech; ii) physical objects, buildings or places; iii) photographs and memes; iv) art work; v) written words i.e: books, poems, characters and; vi) video or TV clips i.e: scenes, events, places, characters. Participants will be asked to make videos of approximately 10-30 seconds on their phones showing each piece of chosen media with a short voice commentary explaining why each piece was chosen and its personal

meaning. The length of video is short as it aims to not seem intimidating or burdensome for vloggers, and also to mimic the brief and familiar format taken by social media posts like 'Tweets' and 'Status Updates', although individuals may create longer videos if they wish.

Participants may, but are not required, to appear in-person on videos and verbal explanations may be 'off camera'. Alternatively, a photo may be taken of the media entry and a separate accompanying audio message recorded explaining its significance. Vlogging options are explained in 'Participant Information' and 'Guidelines for Vlogging' sheets. Participants will be asked to send vlog entries to the researcher via the free, encrypted messaging service Telegram. At the end of the two weeks, there will be a semi-structured, audio-recorded 1:1 interview where vlog entries will be discussed. This interview may take place in person or via video link.

2.3 Data analysis

The research will take the ontological position of critical realism and will analyse data using Narrative Thematic Analysis. Critical realism is used as this framework sees reality as stratified and multi-levelled (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000) and suggests there are different possible perspectives of the world. The premise of critical realism is incorporated as this posits that these multiple perspectives lead to approaches and theories which "attach to the real in different ways" and "carve the world at different joints" (Phillips, 1987, p.205). This framework fits well with the current project as it asserts that the 'real' exists but that there are multiple ways to approach and perceive the real. The complex, multifaceted PO role may then, within this framework, be explored as a multi-levelled reality.

Due to the project's focus on the rich complexity of meaning-making in participants' accounts, Narrative Thematic Analysis will be used to analyse the data. This approach emphasises the storied nature of the world and the ways individuals use narratives to make sense of and represent their lives (Murray, 2003), with the structure of everyday experiences being analysed through the details of individual storytelling. A five step method of Narrative Thematic Analysis (Furman et al., 2010) will be used to code and analyse data, focusing on subjective meaning and narratives of experiences. These steps include: 1) reading the data; 2) open coding for key words and phrases; 3) finding connections and organising codes into themes; 4) further analysis of connections between codes and developed themes; 5) exploring alternative explanations in the data.

Visual data will not be analysed in itself but considered as interview prompts and illustrators alongside transcribed material (Del Busso & Reavey, 2011; Frith, 2011). This was felt to be consistent with the project aims of prioritising PO voice and exploring each individual's unique, personal perspectives of their work roles.

3. Potential benefits of using creative, multimodal methods with prison officers

To complement the complexity of the PO role (Crawley, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2018), the project uses an imaginative, multimodal methodology. This approach was considered to offer several potential benefits for participants, the organisation and the researcher which will be explored below: i) voice and ownership; ii) low risk and resource burden; iii) exploring multiplicity.

3.1 Voice and ownership

A key benefit for choosing multi-modal methods such as these is the potential to increase the participant voice and ownership of the research. This is particularly salient in this research, as lack of acknowledgement and support is an important issue for POs (Crawley, 2004; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017). Towards this end, the method offers a broad variety of vlogging mediums as this flexibility means participants may choose mediums which personally resonate with them, including those they enjoy and use during everyday life. It is hoped that offering participants freedom to use expressive tools with which they feel confident and articulate, to encourage a more meaningful, deeply engaged participation and prominent participant voice. Frith and Harcourt (2008) suggest that allowing participants volition over how and when they engage in the research, and in how their experiences are represented, as a useful way of gathering rich and complex data without making excessive demands on individuals. They also note that allowing participants to retain control may be particularly important for groups who feel disempowered by their experiences. The value of participant control is also relevant for groups where images may arouse emotions or cause reliving of potentially difficult experiences (Frith, 2011). Wang, Burris and Ping (1996, p.1391) similarly recognised the value of empowerment with their photo-novella study with rural women in China who were encouraged to document their lives from their own perspectives, aiming to educate policymakers, researchers and broader society as to the lived realities of this “often not heard” demographic. Using multimodal methods therefore allows data collection to be more ‘participant-led’, where participants may take ownership of the research process and have

freedom to customise their participation to suit their needs and richly reflect their unique voice. As discussed above, POs' voices, particularly in terms of their emotional experiences, are a missing discourse in both research and policy.

Vlogging as a means of data collection also means that individual everyday experience may become more accessible as participants' private reflection and free choice determine what, when and how experiences become 'data'. Data is gathered during times of private, self-instigated reflection and so may generate a raw, lived in type of data that satisfies the participant as much as the researcher. In this way the "private, everyday worlds" of participants can be made visible within the research in a way that interviews alone can seldom generate (Frith & Harcourt, 2007, p.1348). In this way, the current project seeks to prioritise participants' sense of volition and offer them ownership of the research process. Using vlogging and interview methods supports the prioritising of participant's idiosyncratic voice as not only are they offered different vlogging mediums for imaginative expression, but also different types of opportunity to discuss and articulate these experiences. As Reavey and Johnson (2008, p.21) suggest:

"Words, particularly when framed in technical or academic language, are the domain of researchers and therefore can be disempowering to many participants (...) participants may feel more confident in creating drawings, photographs and videos than articulating their experiences through words alone. Their creative enthusiasms, aesthetic capacity and understanding of visualising, mobile technology, doodling, graffiti, sketching, dreaming, blogging, video and digital photography, can be harnessed to express views to mutual benefit."

Taking these creative approaches may lead to data which feels more representative and meaningful to the participant as they are less required to generate potential inaccurate 'instant answers' (Gauntlett, 2007) when engaging with unfamiliar, less everyday tools like psychologically-focused interviews or focus groups. Using methods in which participants are already expert can thus be an important tool in somewhat addressing the power dynamics inherent in research relationships.

3.2 Low risk and resource burden

Another strength of using creative, multimodal methods is their ability to integrate into the fabric of participants' daily lives by mirroring the multiple methods of expression that individuals already use when representing their lived experience (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Use of technologies such as phones, apps and social media are prevalent in daily life as a tool for communication and expression with this prevalence growing still further during the COVID-19 crisis. In this way the use of multimodal methods in this project attempts to imitate the range of media that participants are exposed to everyday.

This means participants will likely be familiar with how to physically work these technologies and also with the concept of using media as a tool for the social performance and expression of self to an audience (Goffman, 1959). Through the many available emerging technologies, the practice of presenting and articulating individual perspectives, emotions and experiences to a dynamic audience through different mediums is well ingrained into contemporary life and has become an important means to communicate and express feelings (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). In this way, participants may find a greater, more satisfying articulation of their emotional experiences.

The use of phones and apps for data collection may also seem less burdensome to participant's already busy schedules, and due to their familiarity will require less resources to use. This is a relevant consideration when working with demographics likely to be under strain, low on morale or personal resources such as POs who may experience multiple negative repercussions from their work (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017; Nylander et al., 2011; Schaufeli, Wilmar & Peeters, 2000). Frith (2011) considered this issue in her participant-led method when working with women who underwent chemotherapy, anticipating participants may experience fatigue and illness that might affect their engagement with research tasks. Creative methods may therefore be flexible and considerate of a specific groups' needs and serve to make participation more accessible and practical in terms of these individual's everyday lives and available resources.

The opportunity to have their individual emotions and experiences acknowledged may also prove beneficial for POs and help to foster rather than deplete their already strained personal resources. For example, in their photo elicitation study, Radley and Taylor (2003, p.82) found participants reported taking photos "had allowed them to become conscious of things of which they had only been peripherally aware." This is particularly relevant considering that POs have been found to report feeling overstretched, "neglected" and their ideas "often ignored" (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017). Devine et al. (2014) also highlighted the importance of staff self-awareness and insight as related to modelling pro-social

behaviours and engagement in therapeutic approaches. Research engagement may therefore offer POs the opportunity for catharsis and also promote essential work-place skills like self-awareness.

This research design also has a minimal resource burden to organisations and researchers. PO participation will occur outside of workplaces and hours. The project also uses creative, multimodal participant recruitment tools with use of a video combining cartoon animation and footage of the researcher, and an accompanying information sheet. It is hoped this recruitment method will generate curiosity and increase the likelihood of participation by explaining the research purposes in a more accessible, everyday manner. By using varied means to communicate new, potentially alien information, i.e: psychological research, there is increased chance of communicating to an individual using a medium which they feel they understand and are already proficient in. Creative recruitment tools may therefore reduce staff time and resources needed to facilitate recruitment, while still introducing the researcher and project in a friendly and accessible manner. This method also poses low risk to establishments as related to COVID-19. Considering the long term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, this method of data collection may be particularly useful as it is a low resource method, which can be used remotely.

3.3 Multimodal means of exploring multidimensional worlds

A benefit of using a multimodal approach is the potential scope and richness it provides the data. Offering participants more varied means to articulate their experiences creates an eclectic, vibrant data set, which may provide deeper and intriguing answers to the research question. This method being particularly helpful for researchers who wish to explore the types of complex, multifaceted roles and multi-layered emotion that are the focus of the research question, due to its capacity for imagination and flexibility in representing individual experience. In this way, multimodal methods also offer the researcher a greater capacity for fluency when attempting to engage with multidimensional phenomena as she may apply multidimensional means of understanding the data. Multimodal approaches therefore create a larger vocabulary for both the participant and researcher by allowing both greater variety and subsequent freedom in how to articulate their understanding of phenomena. The multimodal approach is therefore especially useful for research with POs as this method mirrors the type of flexibility and “wearing many different hats” (Guthrie et al., 2018, p.227) required of this group during their work by allowing POs to engage with different types of modalities to explore

their emotions and experiences. It is hoped this flexible method will allow POs to more authentically and meaningfully represent their complex lived experiences within the data.

Another benefit of using multimodal approaches is that it allows the conflicts inherent within the PO role to be explored in greater depth and in juxtaposition. Using multiple data types allows participants to simultaneously explore competing or conflicting emotional experiences without having to negotiate the limitations of using only one medium. Images are known to evoke emotion, speaking to the ‘unspeakable’ (Reavey & Prosser, 2012), and are helpful where stories are hard to articulate or are beyond words such as in cases of trauma (Emmerson & Frosh, 2004). By using multimodal methods, participants can potentially bypass the gap between visual and verbal by engaging with a method which combines both (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). The multimodal approach therefore allows a greater capacity and elasticity within the data for concurrent exploration of potentially competing emotions and experiences. Research suggests pictures or objects enable individuals to present “ideas and feelings simultaneously without the material being forced into an order or a hierarchy” (Gauntlet, 2007, p.15). The freedom to use a variety of expressive tools to present different aspects of complex experience simultaneously, without these experiences and their meanings having to compete, may prove particularly useful to the PO group given the identified conflicts within their roles.

For the organisation, this approach thus offers a multifaceted, richer insight towards improved staff training and support, and overall prison efficacy. The project findings will culminate in a report for participating establishments highlighting priority needs of staff and practical strategies to enhance wellbeing and effectiveness. This report will be based on the emotional, highly personal experiences of frontline staff as explored in-depth using multimodal methods, and therefore aims to offer new perspectives on issues surrounding training and support, which establishments may use practically. Staff ability to perform professionally is a highly relevant contextual factor affecting incarcerated individuals and overall prison efficacy (Crewe, 2011; Dunbar & Langdon, 1998; Home Office, 1984; Leibling, 2011; McGuire, 2018; Sparks & Bottoms, 2008). It is therefore highly important to explore how to facilitate PO welfare by better understanding the complex, demanding dynamics of their work.

The use of a creative research design including incorporation of technologies like phones and apps was also novel to and keenly supported by the National Research Committee (NRC) when ethical approval was sought. The NRC were interested by the appearance of these technologies as methodological features, as this is unusual in applications to date. This design also raised some ethical considerations such as data security. The design subsequently included the Telegram app as this encrypted messaging service has a self-destruct function for messages

to reduce risks associated with storing data for prolonged periods on a mobile device. This is potentially of interest to imaginative researchers who wish to be less conservative in their research methodology but also question the difficulties of gaining ethical approval and support for such projects. Creative research that uses communication technologies, apps and media platforms is an exciting, new world to explore and potentially offers an accessible, flexible and vibrant tool for psychological investigations. Although there are particular ethical issues to be considered, it appears that such methods may also gain interest and support from ethics committees.

The methods chosen for the ongoing project therefore seek to mirror the priorities of the research question focusing on exploring POs' individual experiences of their work roles, and the personal meanings and symbolisms these experiences hold. Recognising and valuing each participant's individual perspective is particularly relevant for this project considering the current lack of recognition and support surrounding the PO role and the individual impact of their work.

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which creative, multimodal methods are well-suited to research with groups who engage in multifaceted roles within complex systems. The potential benefits of using imaginative methods in qualitative inquiry with such groups have been discussed in relation to the potential benefits for the participant, organisation and researcher. As ideas presented here stem from the first author's ongoing doctoral project, this article has focused specifically on POs as a group who engage in multifaceted roles within complex systems, and for whom multimodal methods are particularly well-suited.

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