



LJMU Research Online

Power, E, Adams, M, Harman, V, Garland, J and McCarthy, D

'Connection Rather Than Output': Reflections on the Role of Art Workshops in Qualitative Research With Women in Prison

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/24518/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Power, E, Adams, M, Harman, V, Garland, J and McCarthy, D (2024)
'Connection Rather Than Output': Reflections on the Role of Art Workshops in Qualitative Research With Women in Prison. International Journal of Qualitative Methods. 23. ISSN 1609-4069

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

‘Connection Rather Than Output’: Reflections on the Role of Art Workshops in Qualitative Research With Women in Prison

International Journal of Qualitative Methods

Volume 23: 1–10

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/16094069241273593

journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq

Erin Power¹ , Maria Adams² , Vicki Harman², Jon Garland², and Daniel McCarthy²

Abstract

This paper offers a reflective account of delivering art workshops in women’s prisons in England, as one method in a larger, qualitative study around the role of food in prisons. We present reflections around the role of art workshops in building relationships and community between the researcher and the participants, and the participants themselves. We found that building connection through art workshops, in a hostile and challenging environment like prison, enabled us to gather richer and deeper data during the qualitative interviews that succeeded the art workshops. We propose that attention from researchers to the ‘unintended consequences’ can contribute to research projects which are impactful for both the participants and researchers. This paper addresses gaps in literature around the use of visual art as method in women’s prisons and the role of arts-based methods in larger qualitative research projects in secure settings.

Keywords

arts based methods, methods in qualitative inquiry, social justice

Introduction

This paper reflects on our experiences of delivering arts workshops in women’s prisons, as part of a larger qualitative study examining the role of food in women’s prisons. Arts-based research methods play a prominent part in qualitative research that enable researchers to understand vulnerable groups in an expressive manner (Harman et al., 2020). This paper contributes to the discussion around the role of arts-based methods in secure settings like prisons, with a particular focus on the relationships built between researchers and participants during our art workshops. By focusing on how art can create connections in hostile and challenging environments we propose that it can play a part in resisting a culture of individualism and mistrust that is central to the contemporary prison (Crewe, 2011; Power, 2020). We draw reference to the significance of women’s imprisonment – widely understood as a site of considerable harm, where issues such as mental illness, vulnerability and trauma pervade the lives of many women (Baldwin, 2023). Through this gendered lens, we are attentive to the ways in which art can feature as an important

expression of identity, recognizing the common narratives of powerlessness, emotion, and trauma in the lives of women in prison.

Qualitative prison research has amassed a detailed repertoire of the experiences, emotions, and spaces (Crewe et al., 2013; Jewkes, 2014; Ugelvik, 2014) that are dovetailed to those incarcerated as well as the position of the researcher (Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017; Jewkes, 2014). However, there is still a gap in literature on a reflective standpoint to understanding the process of art workshops as a contribution to data and exploration of topics like food in prison – an essential aspect of prison life that impacts on issues related to the physical and mental well-being of those incarcerated. This

¹School of Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, UK

²School of Social Sciences, University of Surrey, UK

Corresponding Author:

Maria Adams, School of Social Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK.

Email: m.n.adams@surrey.ac.uk



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

paper addresses this gap by providing an account of how doing visual arts in women's prisons can improve the quality, rapport and depth of the other qualitative methods we used as part of this study. We explore art workshops as a creative way to capture data with participants that are considered vulnerable and in a harmful environment.

Therefore, the paper will explore how art workshops can contribute to the discussions on the role of qualitative research in prison discourse through the use of *conversations, relationships* and impacts and activities *after the workshops* had finished.

Background

The paper contributes to arts-based research using conversations, relationships and activities from during and following data collection workshops, both within and beyond the field of prison research. Arts-based research has considerable ability to enable participants to share their life stories via creative means of expression. In their review of arts-based research, Coemans et al. (2015) borrowed from Austin and Forinash (2005, pp. 458–459) to define arts-based research as: 'a research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method.' Arts-based research can offer participants the opportunities to express thoughts and ideas that may have otherwise been difficult to articulate, especially for those with marginalised identities. The use of arts-based research as a dissemination tool can increase the accessibility of academic findings and encourage conversation and engagement with audiences beyond the academy.

Coemans and Hannes (2017) suggest that arts-based research is a useful tool for engaging academic and wider audiences. They note that other benefits of this approach include being participant driven, offering a safe space for dialogue, discussion and expression, and producing interesting, engaging, and often more personal data. The 'fun' aspect of the method entices people to participate (Fenge et al., 2011) – an even more compelling argument when located in hostile and mundane spaces such as prisons. Coemans and Hannes (2017) argue that arts-based research has a transformative power (ibid, p. 41), borrowing from McKean (2006) to divide this transformation into three 'types': personal, institutional and audience. While, as noted below, we are wary of claims of total transformation within the context of prison, these 'types' appear across literature on arts-based research, recognising its potential to increase wellbeing and confidence (Clover, 2011), develop participants' skills (Clover, 2011; Foster, 2007), and influence audience perspectives (Feldman et al., 2013; McKean, 2006). Arts-based methods are also described as transforming the imagination by allowing participants to freely ask questions (Coemans & Hannes, 2017).

However, there are also ethical and practical limitations to arts-based research. Practically, accessibility is an issue for both participants and researchers (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). These sorts of projects can be inaccessible to researchers who

feel they lack time (Levy & Weber, 2011), resources (Mampaso, 2010), or skills and training (Howard, 2004). The idea of empowerment was also identified by Coemans and Hannes (2017) as a limitation to arts-based research. Harman et al. (2020) note that claims of empowering participants or 'giving them voice' through these methods can be problematic, reflecting a hierarchical relationship through which the researcher 'gifts' empowerment unto the 'powerless' participants. This is particularly significant within a prison context, where the incarcerated participants have many aspects of their agency, identity and power stripped (Crewe et al., 2013). However, a critical consideration of the social identities of both the participants and the researcher, the power dynamics that can be borne from these and from the environment in which the research is undertaken, can encourage researchers to create a research space in which collaboration and co-creation can thrive and, as such, participants can undertake roles, make choices and express ideas in a way that they could experience as empowering.

While there is a substantial amount of literature on arts-based research, there is still a gap regarding understandings of the facilitation of art workshops as a research method in prisons (Atherton et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to bring these methods to the forefront of the discussion when exploring the value of arts-based methods within qualitative research. We will do this by addressing the following question: how do art workshops contribute to the depth of data collected during qualitative research? To explore this, we will; (1) identify existing debates on the role of art workshops in qualitative research; (2) use reflexive accounts from the research team to explore whether *conversations* can be a way to facilitate creative expression and to capture data; (3) understand the types of *relationships* between researchers and participants that occur during and after the art workshops; and lastly, (4) examine the use of exhibitions *after the workshops* as a vehicle to connect incarcerated women and their work to the community.

Arts-Based Research, Prisons and Qualitative Methods

We argue that art workshops are an emblem of connecting practice and research to provide meaningful data, as well as an authoritative voice for participants. Whilst there has been some recognition of the application of arts-based methods in secure settings (Atherton et al., 2022; Baybutt & Kelly-Corless, 2022), much of prison research has fallen to traditional methodological approaches such as surveys, observations, and interviews. While these contribute to quality data, they have limitations when engaging with sensitive subject matter and with groups whose experiences can result in challenges articulating certain emotions. Historically, Sykes' work on 'Society of Captives' created a platform to discuss the role of conducting 'quality' research in prisons by adopting a

qualitative approach by using a range of documents, observations, and interviews. In this he captures micro issues about the prison system including relationships, roles, language, and dynamics of power which complement the macro structural issues. His work enables more recent scholars (Crewe, 2011; Crewe & Laws, 2018; Laws, 2018) to openly challenge the system, and to form abolitionist ideas which have influenced new ways of thinking about conducting prison research.

In response to debates about methodological enquiry in prison research, Reiter (2014) has suggested that meaningful research in prison can only be achieved if there is academic investment to overcome bureaucratic demands from the prison, to establish more emotional connections and collaboration with participants. There have been many testaments from scholars arguing the prison environment places considerable emotional burdens on researchers in the process of engaging with people whose lives are often subject to considerable pain and trauma (Jewkes, 2014; Liebling, 1999). This can contribute to understanding the reflexive accounts by researchers on how their experience, identity and roles interplayed in the prison environment. The use of qualitative approaches can provide opportunities to create powerful and evocative data.

Researching in prison requires data that provides a degree of autonomy for participants using alternative methods including creative ones (Bove & Tryon, 2018) as well as reflexivity (Adams, 2021; Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017). These methods have important utilization in gender sensitive approaches, including application within feminist frameworks that embrace the sensitive, political, and emotive issues around women's lived experiences (Adams, 2021). There are many synergies that cut across this paper with the project's art workshops and finding approaches to enable women to express themselves artistically.

A feminist perspective within research encourages the consideration of hierarchy, power dynamics and intersectional identities, allowing for thoughtful and meaningful relationships to be built between researchers and participants. This is particularly significant within a prison context, in which the flow of power can be one directional and relational solidarity is discouraged (Power, 2020). Within a prison setting, researchers often hold keys, and enjoy freedoms such as being able to choose their meals at the prison canteen and, crucially, leave when they are finished. These freedoms serve to illustrate significant inequalities between the researcher and the researched in a manner that would be less visible in other settings. Undertaking a feminist standpoint does not mitigate these disparities, but it encourages the researcher to be cognisant of them, and to be sensitive to the ways the relationships they build with participants can reproduce this power imbalance or attempt to mitigate it through the creation of collaborative and respectful relationships. Thus, the team embraced a feminist standpoint, shaping the art workshops and an intersectional approach that was adopted in the wider study on food in prison.

Drawing on art methods provides a further insight into defining 'quality' when conducting prison research, and importantly, how we can capture both sensitive and evocative issues that can be a challenge when appropriating traditional methods. The use of arts-based methods enables participants to freely express themselves and for them to experience a sense of agency. Theoretically, feminism has been a way to centre the voices of women through a creative expression that gives women autonomy that helps with tackling wider gender-related issues like social inequalities, oppression, adversity, and male-dominated institutions (Clover, 2011; Harman et al., 2020; Oliveira, 2019). It also challenges traditional scientific knowledge that upholds 'oppressive features' (Clover, 2011) by embracing '*practicing inclusionary and respecting differences*' (Butterwick & Selman, 2000, p. 1). Harman et al. (2020) adopted a feminist approach to theorise the importance of art workshops with survivors of domestic abuse. In this, the authors speak describe how art workshops can bring forth women's voices to artistically express past and current events, with many applications for the experiences of women in prison, whose lives commonly involve trauma and victimization (Baldwin, 2023). Arts-based research provides a collaborative approach that enables participants to express their ideas as well as open opportunities to contribute to the research (Clover, 2011). This approach is also beneficial to working with vulnerable groups, in which some topics can be emotionally demanding to discuss (Scott, 2022).

Tarr et al. (2018) argue that art workshops are a part of the process rather than the outcome and are an evolving journey for both the researcher and participant. The use of art workshops enables the exploration of data in an alternative way, thus contributing new understandings to researchers (Harman et al., 2020; Tarr et al., 2018). Previously, we spoke about the importance of 'space' to mediate the practice of art, and we can further this argument by identifying those arts that enable participants to be imaginative in a 'safe enough' space and to feel able to speak about dangerous topics (Butterwick & Selman, 2000; Coemans & Hannes, 2017).

While we acknowledge the risks of claiming a 'safe space' within a prison context which is inherently 'unsafe' (Prison Reform Trust, 2022), we also observed that the creation of an artistic space can break down barriers for researchers to observe participants narrate stories that are socially transformative. Clover (2011) argues that this blurs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Collectivity has been key in many of the art workshops described here - the use of art enables individuals to hold meaningful conversations (Atherton et al., 2022) and empower one another collectively (Clover, 2011) that shapes a sense of a shared identity (however temporary).

The Study

The art workshops explored in this paper were part of a study funded by the ESRC, entitled 'Doing Porridge: Understanding Women's Experiences of Food in Prison'. The aims of this

project were to understand the eating practices experienced by women in prison. In this, we drew on issues related to social identities, spaces to eat, opportunities to show agency in their food choices, in order to identify policy and practice recommendations to improve food in prison.

As a part of this two-year project, we carried out a qualitative study using focus groups, observations, diaries, interviews and art workshops between April 2021 and October 2023 across four women's prisons in England (these prisons have been anonymized and assigned pseudonyms). This multidisciplinary approach was intended to offer participants a variety of ways to engage with the research.

Overall, 108 women participated in the study (between 26 and 29 women per prison, aged 18 to 65). Some participants opted to participate in a select few methods, while others engaged with every stage of the research. We worked with a racially diverse population with women from white, Black Caribbean, African, and South Asian descent.

Within this paper we draw on reflective notes from one researcher who attended the art workshops. These notes were written immediately after each workshop and were shared and discussed amongst the research team.

Art Workshops

The art workshops were intended to offer women the opportunity to creatively engage with the topic of food in prisons. In collecting artistic outputs, we hoped to '*notice what we have learned not to see*' (Eisner, 1995, p. 3). We ran two days of workshops at each of the four establishments, which were deliberately loose in design to ensure that they were responsive to the needs and ideas of the participants. On day one of each workshop, we started with an ice breaker exercise in which we all doodled to prompts such as 'favourite/worst meal in prison', 'food I miss' and 'food on canteen' in order to demonstrate that art does not need to be 'good' and to evoke conversation about prison food. The lead artist then demonstrated the tools available to the participants and we would begin to create art, while continuing the conversation. The focus of the first day was to create a relaxed atmosphere in which food could be discussed and art created. It was important that the researchers also took part in the workshops so that participants did not feel pressure to make 'good art' and to create a space in they did not feel 'watched' or exposed. The second day was spent refining art ready for the public exhibition. This exhibition was held in January 2023 and the artwork was displayed alongside other pieces made by women from secure institutions including forensic hospitals, young offender institutions and immigration detention centres.

Each workshop was attended by four to six participants. These were recruited from women on our prison advisory board (a board in which two representatives from each prison helped to inform the research design), women we had met during our observations, and women who had already participated in the diary or interview stages of the research. We

had no criteria for the selection of these women beyond them expecting to be incarcerated in that prison for the length of the workshops and being approved by security to attend.

Initially, we had intended that each art workshop would host around 12 women and, although we were able to recruit this number with ease, there were challenges that involved clashes with activities and appointments, alongside women being moved between prisons or released. This often caused a lower attendance than we anticipated. Nevertheless, we found positive benefits of hosting a smaller group including witnessing meaningful conversations, that the group was easier to manage, and the researchers were able to get to know each of the women better.

'Doing Art in Prisons'

We title this section 'Doing Art' which is complementary to the title of our study, 'Doing Porridge'. We suggest that the 'Doing' can encompass the experiences, feelings and relationships that evolve during the art workshops. Furthermore, the spaces in which the workshops were delivered also contributed to the type of data captured. We argue that the artwork became transient from the walls of the prison and beyond in a public space. Therefore, it is important to see all of these attributes that contribute to the journeys women experienced to express the role of food in prison. In this section, we present a range of fieldnotes to narrate these experiences that were produced during the workshops, and document this through the subsections of 'conversations', 'relationships', and 'after the workshops'.

Conversations

Art-based methods provide resources for participants to be creative and document their experiences. However, we also found another aspect in doing this type of research was the art of conversations. Our initial intention was to use art as a tool to facilitate conversations around prison food. We came into the first workshop with a wealth of creative activities we could use to spark and guide these conversations but found that conversation itself was a useful tool to facilitate the creation of art around prison food. We found that these conversations were often provocative and emotive, which enabled women to work collaboratively and to unintendedly produce meaningful data (Atherton et al., 2022; Clover, 2011). The extract below demonstrates how conversations informed artwork:

The women were seated on a table that spread across the room, and with the women, there was the art teacher as well as the two researchers from the project. The art teacher instructed the women to doodle their initial thoughts about whatever comes to mind when they think about food in prison which spurred conversations about the experiences women had in eating in prisons and the different spaces they occupied when it came to consuming food with many referring to past experiences for example, one woman

focused on the eating in the cells near toilets. This then spurred on conversations about eating practices during COVID times, in which women were largely segregated and locked up. The women were vocal about how food was presented and delivered in their cells, in which, some described the idea of that the prison officers treated them like they had an illness. Interestingly, this led to wider conversation about how women felt about the purpose of punishment in the UK, with one woman speaking about the ideas that punishment should be only about the sentence and not how you are treated in prison. Much of the artwork reflected this with one woman doodling a person wearing a COVID mask with references to food on the mask. (Researcher's Fieldnotes, HMP Larkhall)

We can also argue that the space used to facilitate art workshops is exceptional (Jewkes & Laws, 2021), as it has provided a degree of comfort and safety for women to speak about topics not easily facilitated in the rest of the prison estate (Butterwick & Selman, 2000; Coemans & Hannes, 2017).

Due to security restrictions in some prisons, we were unable to have a role in the recruitment of women to the art workshops. This impacted on the initial enthusiasm for and engagement in the workshops:

The first prison we delivered the art workshops in was, in many ways, the most difficult prison for us to navigate. Due to security restrictions, we were unable to move around the prison ourselves, despite holding keys and, especially in the early stages of the project, this restricted us from developing strong relationships with our research participants, as we were always accompanied by a prison officer and were limited in our abilities to be responsive to what the women told us (for example, in other prisons, we could stay in communal areas for long periods of time if women had questions, or could go to visit specific wings that women informed us has interesting facilities etc.). This meant that most women attending the art workshops in this prison were unknown to us and had been referred to the project by prison staff. As such, there were some initial tensions and confusion as the women were unsure what they were attending or why had they been selected. (Researcher's Fieldnotes, HMP Blakedown)

Power (2020) notes that this sort of recruitment results in ethical issues around consent and risks attendance feeling mandatory or punitive, as well as practical issues, such as people being enrolled onto courses that do not align with their interests or schedules. In this instance, only one of our participants had a preexisting interest in art, and she had a work schedule that meant attendance at these workshops would result in a loss of pay (therefore, we provided her with materials and stimulus and she created art in her own time). These ethical and practical issues do not align with our research values, thus we had to be responsive in our workshop plan, particularly because none of the participants, except the woman mentioned above, had any confidence in their artistic ability. As such we began with a more detailed explanation of

the project which led to conversations around prison food. Everybody had sketchbooks and pens and were encouraged to doodle as we chatted, and we focused on the conversations rather than the creation of art. These conversations lasted about 20 min before we began to introduce the participants to the art materials. By this point, the talk about prison food had borne inspiration for some art pieces. As well as acting as stimulus for the creation of artwork, the informal conversations helped us to develop friendly relationships with the women which aided both the workshops and the subsequent stages of the research (as will be explored in the below section). Subsequently, we adopted the conversation model across the other prisons to ease women into the arts workshops. This proved successful across all four establishments. However, it is important to note that the relationship between conversation and the creation of art was not straightforward. While initially conversation informed the creation of artwork, once we began creating art the conversations became more personal. We suggest that the act of 'Doing Art' (which the researchers also participated in) enabled participants to share parts of themselves in an environment where nobody's eyes, or focus was upon them. This led to conversations about identity, femininity, values and self-esteem, some of which went on to inform the artwork created. An example of this is a conversation in HMP Dickens where a woman explained that her treatment in prison, particularly in relation to the food she was provided with to meet her dietary needs, made her feel less than human:

Diane told me that kitchen's resistance to providing her with adequate nutrition led her to feeling that her body was unworthy of love or care. She explained that not being able to access food that she was able to eat took such a toll on her physical and mental health that it had previously led to her feeling suicidal, something she had never felt before prison. This informed the art she created (see [supplemental material, Figure 1](#)) in which she depicted herself sat next to a cardboard box of food which did not meet her dietary needs, with prominent self-harm scars on her arms (Researcher's Fieldnotes, HMP Dickens)

As such, we can see that the act of creating art also enabled deeper conversations which then informed the art. We were careful not to probe around these more exposing topics as it was important to consider the vulnerability of our participants, both in terms of their current living conditions and the circumstances that had brought them there (Cappellini et al., 2023). However, it was important to us that the art created was truly representative of women's experiences, and we felt that creating an informal environment where the focus was on connection rather than output helped to achieve this. This example reinforces that art workshops create a space that has the potential to tackle issues of adversity, and most importantly, can open issues intersected with social identities and social inequalities (Clover, 2011; Harman et al., 2020; Oliveira, 2019). We suggest that understanding this potential

enables us to recognise how art workshops can strengthen a wider qualitative study. Furthermore, this is also another example of the need to appreciate feminist values (Harman et al., 2020) when curating arts-based methods in women-centred settings. Below we explore how these conversations led to us developing deeper and more honest relationships with the participants, which informed other aspects of our qualitative study.

Relationships

The relationship and power hierarchies that exist between researchers and research participants is a much-explored topic in qualitative research (Adams, 2021; Clover, 2011). It is not uncommon for prison researchers to have experienced these challenges while still trying to maintain a level of autonomy to mitigate the power imbalances between researcher and participant (Adams, 2021; Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017; Earle, 2014). While it would be naïve to suppose that a series of art workshops could flatten these hierarchies, we suggest that they did aid the development of friendly and open relationships in which participants and researchers were able to connect. In their research on doing art workshops with women in refuges, Cappellini et al. (2023) identified that the experience of creating art alongside other participants can engender a closeness. They explained that while the researcher has the option to only engage in the art-making in a superficial manner, not sharing much of themselves with the participants, none of the researchers on their project did so. Our experience was reflective of this and while security considerations meant that we perhaps had to be more considered in the information we chose to share, as mentioned above, focusing on the creation of art as we spoke helped to cultivate richer conversations around more personal topics. Participation in these conversations allowed all involved to connect around shared experiences and perspectives, thus developing more trusting and authentic relationships.

Clover (2011) identified this as creating a sense of community through art, and as many participants were able to freely express themselves, they started to create a 'collective empowerment', in which they came to the workshops as individuals but through conversations developed a collective sense of 'we'. It also enabled us as researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the context of our participants' lives, both inside and outside of prison. This meant that the interviews which took place after these workshops were richer in terms of what the women chose to share with us, and their engagement with the subject. Not only were we able to discuss the art they had created during their interviews but having engaged creatively with the research topic prior to the interviews meant that the women were generally more thoughtful about their experiences of food in prison.

The art workshops also meant that we could be responsive to individual women in our interviewing. For example, knowing who had children, what ages they were, and whether

the participant has been their primary carer helped us to be sensitive and thoughtful with our questioning about pre-prison eating habits. Within the higher security prison, HMP Blakedown, our interviews were carried out in private rooms with officers standing directly outside. Having delivered our art workshops in the more relaxed space of the art room in the education building prior to the interviews, we had been able to build more informal relationships with the women which meant that the interviews felt more informal than they perhaps otherwise would have.

Similarly, knowing who had complex or disordered relationships with food, (as many women did) enable us to be responsive to that. These conversations cultivated trusting relationships which led to more personal interactions. The trust developed also helped to create a space for silliness, playfulness and joy. In the first prison we ran the workshops in, the final session had the feel of a 'girls' night' according to one participant:

In this session, while we put the finishing touches on our pieces, we joked about romantic relationships and one woman gave a dramatic reading a love letter she had recently received. These comfortable, friendly relationships not only impacted on the feel and content of our subsequent interviews, but also significantly aided recruitment. Because many of the women trusted and liked us, they were able to introduce us to women that they thought we would be interested in talking to. These included women who were on 'canteen only' diets¹, or had previously been chefs, or did most of the microwave cooking for their group of friends, whom our prison staff contact may not have necessarily been aware of. (Researcher's Fieldnotes, HMP Blakedown)

These art workshops cultivated positive relationships between the researchers and participants and also between the participants themselves. Some of the shyer or 'newer to prison' members of the group were able to ask for advice about negotiating prison from more prison-experienced or confident group members. Women who had not previously known one another were able to make connections which acted as additional support. While these were unintended consequences of the workshops, we consider them of particular importance within the prison, in which experiences of relational solidarity and mutual regard are often discounted, or even discouraged.

After the workshops

There was a series of gains from the art workshops that were significant for the women. Literature tends to only delve into the actual event and not so much the aftermath, thus it is important to highlight some of the small yet memorable changes for women that carried their experiences and feelings further. When writing the proposal for this project, we wanted the art workshops to lead to an exhibition, where we could showcase the women's artwork to highlight issues about prison in a public space, and to celebrate the voices of women.

However, we also found other aspects that were consequential to the workshops: for example, some of the women developed an interest in art and wanted to pursue it further:

During one workshop Naomi told me that she loved art, but this was the first time she was able to access it. During a meeting with the education manager, I was able to raise this and she explained that there were arts programmes, but it tended to be the same women who attended them, as they were known to education staff. The education manager promised that she would advertise these programmes more widely and, when I last visited Naomi, four months after the initial workshops, she had taken part in a number of creative courses including crafts and creative writing. (Researcher Fieldnotes, HMP Dickens)

Indeed, a number of women across the four establishments went on to attend other creative classes and groups after participating in our workshops. For the women who were already involved or interested in art, the use of high-quality materials also had an impact beyond the workshops. During the workshops' design, we decided it was important to provide participants with high quality materials as we felt that this could link to the ways in which the women felt valued or respected within the prison. In HMP Blakedown, one woman used the materials provided to create an 'under the sea' mural on her wing:

At the end of the workshops, we divided left over materials between the women who had participated. When I came back the women were keen to show me what they made with these materials. These included artworks to decorate their rooms and art works and cards to be sent as gifts for friends, family, or other women in the prison. Samantha, who had recently been assigned the role of wing painter had used her paint and brushes to create an under the sea themed mural on a large wall of the wing association room. (Researcher Fieldnotes, HMP Blakedown)

This was not only impactful for the woman who made the mural, it may also have a wider impact for the other woman on the wing in relation to improving the environment in which they lived (McGrath & Reavey, 2018). This is testament to the women being inspired to pursue art further or to demonstrate other forms of expression. When we visited the wing many of the women engaged us in conversation about the mural and we spent time examining its different elements.

Power (2020) suggests that it is important, when exploring the impacts of arts on individuals in prisons, to be cautious of allowing these impacts to act as a 'varnish' which covers over or distracts from the harms of imprisonment. In this way, it was important to us that the art workshops also considered structural changes by opening conversations about the harms of imprisonment with those who have influence. As such, the art created was shown in an exhibition hosted by Koestler Arts and South Hill Park Arts Centre. The intention of this exhibition was to use art to stimulate debates about prison food

among the general public as well as an invited audience of prison and charity leaders. In this, Atherton et al. (2022) argue that the movement of art from the prison to the public can be seen as an 'extending hope-transference', in which their participants were able to attend the exhibition to celebrate the work in the community. Unfortunately, we were unable to do this as most of the women were still in prison at the time of the exhibition and were not eligible for Release on Temporary License. However, we could still apply this concept to exploring the gap between prison art and the community, and to share a range of messages on the role of food in prison. We tried to address this by taking photographs of the exhibition and postcards that had been made of their work to the women.

Another ethical issue around the workshop was the translation of the art from the prisons to the gallery. Cappellini et al. (2023) suggest that, when part of research projects, art exhibitions function similarly to academic publications in that the researchers select and organises the material to exhibit. As a research team, we wanted to include all pieces of art made during the workshops. However, because we were displaying in a public gallery, our project partners made the decision that the artwork made by Diane, described in the 'Conversations' section, was too graphic for public display. While we were able to display other art by Diane, this was an example of the ways in which the voices of vulnerable or marginalised people can be sanitised for public consumption.

Our inclusion of a number of voices involved in imprisonment went some way to trying to address this. At the exhibition opening keynote speakers included people who had worked within the field of arts and criminal justice and who had experienced imprisonment. They referred to structural issues that prevented incarcerated people accessing quality food. One senior member of prison staff, looking at a piece of work entitled 'All I Want is Some Fresh Milk' (see supplemental material, Figure 2) commented on '*how this reminder that women on long sentences cannot access fresh milk for years had been really shocking to her*'. Whilst we do not have the ability to make significant changes within the prison system, this exhibition worked alongside other interventions (our art workshops and the charity Food Behind Bars) to develop better food practices in each prison.

Conversations around the ownership of artwork can also raise ethical concerns, especially as, due to Her Majesty's Prisons and Probation restrictions, the work we displayed was completely anonymous. Therefore, while we were unable to put the women's names on their work, we were conscious that they had ownership over what happened to it after the exhibition. Once the exhibition closed, we offered to return the work to the women. A few took us up on this, but the majority preferred to have copies (through postcards, photographs and photocopies) and that we continue to display the work in our university department. All the women gave permission for their work to be reproduced in our publications as there was an implicit understanding that having this work seen by as many people as possible was beneficial. While the women involved

in other parts our study had questions around the purpose of our overall project, largely centred around how the study could tangibly impact prison food, there was a notable lack of scepticism over the 'point' of the art workshops. In part, we suggest that this is due to the break in routine they offered the women, and the opportunity to make connections and access a 'fun' and relaxed space within the prison. However, as the women also seemed enthusiastic and interested in their work being viewed by large and varied audiences, we also note a shared and implicit understanding of the power of art to communicate and influence perspectives.

Exhibiting at South Hill Park Arts Centre has also allowed the women who exhibited art to be provided with positive feedback on their work from the public, which would have been difficult to produce in a qualitative study that did not include arts. We can understand the art workshops as a mechanism including the women in the ongoing conversation about prison food. By including arts workshops in our study we were able to act upon our feminist and anti-oppressive values, ensuring that the work not only benefited us as researchers but also has tangible short-term and (we hope), long-term impacts for women in prison.

Conclusion

We have illustrated that art workshops contributed to an understanding of the experiences of women in prison. We suggest that art workshops are also a vehicle that connects the spaces of prison to the community. In this paper, we have discussed how considering the often-unseen aspects of art workshops can contribute to the value of qualitative research. The principles of the art workshops were to ensure women had a space where they feel creatively safe to develop art around food in prison. However, we also found that capturing data can be informed by the unseen and often uncaptured nuances of art workshops including *conversations*, *relationships* and impacts and experiences *after the workshop*, which all contributed significantly to our learning about the broader issues related to women in prison.

Our observations highlight that the process of art workshops contribute to capturing data as much as the outcome (Tarr et al., 2018), and we documented many examples around the conversations that emerged in the art workshops which were both 'provocative and evocative' (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). The value of these conversations both informed the artwork and helped to build a collective in the space, and therefore we argue that this contributes to the value of qualitative research. The evolving conversations demonstrated that women were able to freely speak, and as such, that art workshops can create spaces to empower those participating. These conversations enabled us as researchers to develop further insights into the prison system which did not necessarily focus on food but connected loosely to it, like the conversations about 'punishment'. These conversations enabled women to form as a collective, something especially

important in the context of the hostile prison environment which promotes individualism over mutual solidarity. We can understand this as a form of 'collective empowerment', where the work produced has been individual, however, many women shared similar sentiments about food in prison which were reproduced in their artwork.

We continue this discussion on collectivity by highlighting that the relationships documented in this process contribute to the value of qualitative research. The relationships identified included friendships, allies or supporters, like the art teacher or even the researchers, and therefore these art workshops created pockets of communities that forged and strengthened connections that may have not existed before. We see these as vitally contributing to the overarching purpose of this study, which is about sharing messages on the complex nature of food in prison, by providing a narrative as to how the artwork emerged.

Lastly, this paper identified that events after the workshop are important factors to consider when understanding the process. We suggest that this is a 'transference of hope' (Atherton et al., 2022), as art can make perspectives from prison visible in the community. This can provoke a range of emotions and discussions as the public are able to experience the messages that are created by the women. Whilst the exhibition has continued the dialogue about food in prison, we have also documented the small changes for women after participating, including feeling inspired to continue developing their art skills. These may not have been the initial intention of the art workshops, but we found that these were impactful changes for women due to them being able to access artistic resources, which may not be available to them before.

In this way, we suggest that, when planning arts-based research projects, consideration is given to building connections, as well as to the output of the project. Much planning around prison-based research projects focuses on risk and potentially negative consequences. We propose that acknowledgment and celebration of unintended, or difficult to quantify positive consequences is key to creating work that is in line with our feminist values, and to resist a culture of mistrust endemic in the contemporary prison. Overall, this paper has demonstrated that the process of the art workshops in prisons is an exemplary to using creative means to understand the role of food in women's prisons. We suggest that the conversations had, and relationships formed during these art workshops were significantly aided by the act of creating art- a communal and un-hierarchical activity (Cappellini et al., 2023), which itself provoked conversations about both the research topic, and the shared interests and experiences of participants and researchers. These conversations helped to produce rich data, both during the workshops and in the wider qualitative study and contributed an additional perspective from which to examine women's experiences of prison food. As such, it is an important way to tackle issues that could be sensitive, evocative and, as some may not be able to verbalize their experiences via interviews, adopting art workshops

should be seen as an added value to qualitative research, not only within prisons, but in a wider research context.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Erika Flowers, Claire Warrington and the prison teams who helped to facilitate the art workshops.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/V010190/1).

ORCID iDs

Erin Power  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1164-3186>

Maria Adams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8221-2992>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. 'Canteen' is an ordering system in which women can purchase additional food and hygiene products using money from their prison wages or sent in by family and friends. The women place the order on a 'canteen sheet' and get weekly deliveries of their orders. A 'canteen-only' diet is when the women do not eat the food provided by the prison kitchens but survive solely on food they purchase on canteen. These sorts of diets often include tinned fish, instant noodles and wraps.

References

- Adams, M. (2021). Intersectionality and reflexivity: Narratives from a BME female researcher inside the hidden social world of prison visits. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 160940692098214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920982141>
- Atherton, S., Knight, V., & van Barthold, B. C. (2022). Penal arts interventions and hope: Outcomes of arts-based projects in prisons and community settings. *The Prison Journal*, 102(2), 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00328855221079282>
- Austin, D., & Forinash, M. (2005). Arts-based inquiry. In B. Wheeler (Ed.), *Music therapy research* (pp. 458–471). Barcelona Publishers.
- Baldwin, L. (2023). *Gendered justice: Women, trauma and crime*. Waterside Press.
- Baybutt, M., & Kelly-Corless, L. (2022). Moving forwards: Using creative methods for people in prison with care experience. *Prison Service Journal*, 258, 32–38.
- Bove, A., & Tryon, R. (2018). The power of storytelling: The experiences of incarcerated women sharing their stories. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(15), 4814–4833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18785100>
- Butterwick, S., & Selman, J. (2000). *Telling stories and creating participatory audience: Deep listening a Feminist popular theatre project*. Adult education research conference. Available: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/papers/13>
- Cappellini, B., Campos, S., & Harman, V. (2023). Drawing with women: Ethical considerations from an art-based project on domestic violence. In F. Kerrigan, & C. Preece (Eds.), *Marketing the arts: Breaking boundaries* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Cheliotis, L. K. (2010). The ambivalent consequences of visibility: Crime and prisons in the mass media. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 6(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659010378629>
- Clover, D. (2011). Successes and challenges of feminist arts-based participatory methodologies with homeless/street-involved women in Victoria. *Action Research*, 9(1), 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750310396950>
- Coemans, S., & Hannes, K. (2017). Researchers under the spell of the arts: Two decades of using arts-based methods in community-based inquiry with vulnerable populations. *Educational Research Review*, 22, 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2017.08.003>
- Coemans, S., Wang, Q., Leysen, J., & Hannes, K. (2015). The use of arts-based methods in community-based research with vulnerable populations: Protocol for a scoping review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 71, 33–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.02.008>
- Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474511422172>
- Crewe, B., & Laws, B. (2018). Subcultural adaptations to incarceration. In J. Wooldredge, & P. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of prisons and imprisonment*. OUP.
- Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P., & Smith, A. (2013). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18(1), 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480613497778>
- Damsa, D., & Ugelvik, T. (2017). A difference that makes a difference? Reflexivity and researcher effects in an all-foreign prison. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 160940691771313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917713132>
- Earle, R. (2014). Insider and Out: Making Sense of a Prison Experience and a Research Experience. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 429–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413515832>
- Eisner, E. W. (1995). What artistically crafted research can help us understand about schools. *Educational Theory*, 45, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1995.00001.x>
- Fenge, L. A., Hodges, C., & Cutts, W. (2011). Seen but seldom heard: Creative participatory methods in a study of youth and risk. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(4), 418–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000408>
- Feldman, S., Hopgood, A., & Dickins, M. (2013). Translating research findings into community based theatre: More than a

- dead man's wife. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(4), 476–486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.03.007>
- Foster, V. (2007). The art of empathy: Employing the arts in social inquiry with poor, working-class women. *Social Justice*, 34, 12–27.
- Harman, V., Cappellini, B., & Campos, S. (2020). Using visual art workshops with female survivors of domestic violence in Portugal and England: A comparative reflection. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(1), 23–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1672285>
- Howard, L. A. (2004). Speaking theatre/doing pedagogy: Re-Visiting theatre of the oppressed. *Communication Education*, 53(3), 217–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452042000265161>
- Jewkes, Y. (2014). An introduction to “doing prison research differently”. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 387–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413515828>
- Jewkes, Y., & Laws, B. (2021). Liminality revisited: Mapping the emotional adaptations of women in carceral space. *Punishment & Society*, 23(3), 394–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474520959623>
- Laws, B. (2018). The Return of the Suppressed: Exploring how emotional suppression returns as violence and pain among male and female prisoners. *Punishment & Society*, 21(5), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474518805071>
- Levy, L., & Weber, S. (2011). Teenmom.ca: A community arts-based new media empowerment project for teenage mothers. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(4), 292–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2011.11518842>
- Liebling, A. (1999). Doing research in prison:: Breaking the silence? *Theoretical Criminology*, 3(2), 147–173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480699003002002>
- Mampaso, A. (2010). La fortuna, por siempre y para siempre', a cross-generational and participatory documentary. *Encounters/ Encuentros/Rencontres on Education*, 11, 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.15572/enco2010.03>
- McGrath, L., & Reavey, P. (2018). *The handbook of mental health and space: Community and clinical applications*. Oxford Routledge.
- McKean, A. (2006). Playing for time in “the dolls’ house”. Issues of community and collaboration in the devising of theatre in a women’s prison. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 11(3), 313–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780600900685>
- Oliveira, E. (2019). The personal is political: A feminist reflection on a journey into participatory arts-based research with sex worker migrants in South Africa. *Gender and Development*, 27(3), 523–540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664047>
- Power, E. (2020). *Performing neoliberalism: Stories of care, conformity and resistance within contemporary prison theatre*. [Doctoral Thesis, Edge Hill University]. <https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/performing-neoliberalism-stories-of-care-conformity-and-resistance>
- Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Bromley Briefings prison fact file: Winter 2022*. Available: Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2022 | Prison Reform Trust.
- Reiter, K. (2014). Making windows in walls: Strategies for prison research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 417–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413515831>
- Scott, S. (2022). ‘I enjoy having someone to rant to, I feel like someone is listening to me’: Exploring emotion in the use of qualitative, longitudinal diary-based methods. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1–15.
- Sykes. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press.
- Tarr, J., Gonzalez-Polledo, E., & Cornish, F. (2018). On liveness: Using arts workshops as a research method. *Qualitative Research*, 18(1), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117694219>
- Ugelvik, T. (2014). Prison ethnography as lived experience: Notes from the diaries of a beginner let loose in Oslo prison. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 471–480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413516272>