

Prison Writings as a Source of Qualitative Prison Research*

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The main argument of this paper is that the results of qualitative prison research based on prison writings might be a valuable source for better understanding the effects imprisonment has on convicts and of the characteristics of the experience of imprisonment. Furthermore, these insights describing the qualitative effects could be particularly important in all sorts of reform of the system of punishment and resocialisation, and therefore should be much more present in penology and other relevant disciplines in the region. The objective of the paper is to introduce the basic principles of grounded qualitative prison research on prison writings to researchers in Serbian penology and criminology and provide an example of it. Starting with the epistemological and theoretical foundations of qualitative research in the postpositivist philosophy of science and listing the main characteristics of qualitative prison research, I continue with overviewing the main procedures of qualitative prison research based on writings such as sampling, data collection, coding and data interpretation, followed by drawing scientifically and policy-relevant conclusions. Subsequently, I provide the typology of the main forms of prison writings, potentially helpful for understanding the variety and richness of literate production coming from prisons that could bring valuable insights for penological and criminological studies. In the next sections, I examine the methodological procedures usually employed in prison writing-based qualitative research such as textual analysis, discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). These most common procedures are briefly overviewed to summarise the basics of the qualitative analysis derived from prison notes and open the way for the conclusions. In the conclusion, I summarise the main advantages and disadvantages of the much wider use of qualitative research based on prison notes in penology, criminology and related disciplines, both in Serbia and in the region.

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Introduction²

This paper provides an overview of the main advantages of using qualitative sources (more precisely prison notes or prison writings)³ in penology and other relevant disciplines. Qualitative research, I claim, provides thick, detailed and authentic insights into the experience of life in prison, which makes it increasingly valuable for academic and other purposes. The main objective of this paper is to provide supporting arguments for the claim that qualitative research in penology is more suitable for getting better insights into the characteristics, effects and outcomes of the prison experience on the incarcerated individual compared to quantitative research and introduce the basics of conducting prison writings based qualitative research followed by an example to researchers in Serbian criminology and penology. Although qualitative research can include many types of sources, my focus here is exclusively on written, textual sources belonging to the different literacy genres. Prison notes are sometimes written purposely to get published and sometimes without the intention of publication, but rather were discovered and made public later despite initially representing just a deeply private act of coping with the deprivation of cell isolation. According to some authors, prison literature became officially accepted and popular during the English Reformation when prison became a place from where influential literature came into the public and the genre of prison literature was established in the public compared to only some isolated examples in previous periods (Ahnert, 2013). As this paper demonstrates, research grounded in postpositivist epistemology and qualitative methodology provides a more accurate understanding of the effects prison has on individuals and of its possible positive and negative outcomes in terms of resocialization and the prevention of recidivism.

Along with demonstrating some advantages of qualitatively framed research designs, I provide an overview of the epistemological specificities of a postpositivistic approach compared to the positivist research foundations in the philosophy of science as the ultimate scientific authority. The approach to qualitative research here emphasises disagreement with the simplified, reduced and dichotomic separation of the two approaches, usually coming from the positivist attempts to disqualify qualitative approaches as less scientific, rigorous

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³ Using the term prison writings rather than prison notes associate more strongly with giving these writings a sort of recognition and value.

and accurate. On the contrary, as postpositivist philosophers of science and their derived methodologies demonstrate, qualitatively framed research tends to give much more justice to the complexity of human experience and therefore could provide a more accurate understanding of the laws underlying the functioning of the human and social world. This is especially true in the case of specific situations such as imprisonment. Throughout this analysis, I demonstrate how a methodology focused on the particular rather than the general is more suitable for studying the phenomenon of incarceration, itself very specific and unique compared to all the other social phenomena (Reimer, 1996). I am naming the approach to qualitative research in criminology and penology here presented, based on prison writings, following the other authors working in the same direction, as *narrative criminology* (Colvin, 2015, p. 211).⁴

The handling of prison notes as a source of qualitative data depends on the design of the overall research project plan. Observing it in the context of the defined *theoretical and methodological framework* of the research project is very important. While there are theories that more easily connect to prison notes as a source and overall qualitative research methodology and techniques than others, in practice many unexpected combinations might occur, including also using it as a mere additional, background material, or as a combination or mixture of quantitative and qualitative method known as *mixed or combined methodology*. Qualitative research in this sense expectedly is mostly connected to critical theory and disciplines of sociology, cultural studies and critical political economy. At the same time, the theory of importance for qualitative research is also grounded theory. According to grounded theory knowledge can be built inductively, from collected and coded empirical data, not as it usually in positivism was the case, deductively. Connecting the apparatuses of different disciplinary traditions appears crucial for qualitative research. At the same time, interpretation of the portions of meaningful units of language – discourses - are crossed with social and structural analysis where they have been attributed to social formations and formed social inequalities.

Qualitative Prison Research

One among the main reasons why qualitative research based on prison writings is particularly useful is considered to be their ability to bring us the unique experience of imprisonment closer. Starting from the epistemological overview of the postpositivist philosophy of science, I intend to demonstrate the specific value of the different types of prison notes for reaching more complex and rich

⁴ In the same direction, we could say *narrative penology* as well.

cognitions about the incarceration experience by overviewing its main features and drawing the conclusions.

First is the focus on experience as reflected in the narrative, or text, which is a special benefit of qualitative research. While research framed in positivistic approach is otherwise focused on *what* question, qualitative analysis is focused on *why* questions. Therefore, understanding how the experience is embedded within social, cultural and institutional structures is much more important than explaining any of the relations between variables statistically abstracted from behavioural phenomena. In other words, qualitative research based on material like prison writings is focused on how larger social infrastructural, institutional and cultural narratives might inform our understanding and shape stories on how both the researcher and informant experience life events and the conditions of life in a given society (Given, 2008). Stories or narratives are in the focus of qualitatively framed analysis, and their main appearance comes in the forms of units of both meaning and language organized in detectable patterned differences and discourse structures such as *text*, *discourse*, *narratives* etc, which are characterized by temporal, linear organisation. Despite the overlap between these units of meaning, there are also distinguishable differences useful to inform the fundamental methodological procedures of qualitative research – *coding*. Coding is, in other words, the extraction of the basic unit of analysis from the collected qualitative data according to and following the research question and the objectives.

Narrative texts are “a form of discourse that has been fixed by writing” (Given, 2008, p. 545). On the other hand, a discourse is a segment of meaning or significance, the central element in the constitution of reality. Forms of discourse can be verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, which is then transcribed into written text or transcripts and further utilised as data. One of the most popular types of qualitative analysis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which focuses on discursive aspects of social problems. The research procedure is simple starting with the selection of the sample, followed by the collection of the data, transcribing the data, reading it multiple times, initial and comprehensive coding, interpretation of the results and drawing the conclusions and recommendations.

Definition and Typology of Prison Writings

Prison writing and writing about prisons, besides offering an insight into the places that are subject of growing interest from the side of the general public “can also provide opportunities for the incarcerated to express themselves, critique the system of detention, and document their struggle for survival and sanity – a struggle similar to the people incarcerated alongside them and even those far away, in other times and places” (Kelly & Westall, 2020, p. 1). Following the classifications existing in the literature, for this paper a joint hybrid classification

will be prepared that can be used to orient future prison research based on prison notes. Plenty of criteria could be utilised to classify prison notes into distinct categories which might be utilised further in the research processes for sorting out the structure of the argument and providing the supporting evidence. One of the basic ways of classification of prison writings is into the groups of canonical texts of this genre that became classics and well-known in comparison to the massive growth of the projects of regularly updated expressions about prison life cases that possess cultural and overall significance and relevance which is at the same time “spectacular” and “marginal” (Kelly & Westall, 2020, pp. 4–11).

First and the most important distinction is between writings made in prison cells by current convicts and, on the other hand, secondary writings made about the experience in prison after release, from the outside. Furthermore, prison literature might be distinguished between authors who experienced imprisonment and wrote something related themselves, and those who write about the experience of imprisonment despite not having experienced it themselves.⁵ Another level of distinction is between notes made by the convict compared to notes made by someone else about their experience in the prison cell. Speaking of the content itself, it could be prison-related, or it could not, but rather belong to some other genre of fiction or nonfiction. The prison notes might also be classified through basic literature genres since convicts might also write all sorts of prose and poetry in prison. Furthermore, notes about the prison experience might be obtained by a researcher using a given research methodology such as in-depth interviews, oral histories or focus group techniques rather than standing as a primary source.

The classification of prison notes appeared to be a much more complicated and complex process than at first it might look, because many of the genres appeared to be written from inside the prison cells, but also many of the quite specific sub-genres closely associated with the prison theme might be identified in existing writings.

- Memoirs, autobiographies, oral histories and diaries are probably the most holistic and important sources of qualitative prison research since they could be a valuable source of unique information providing context and a sense of the criminal act as observed in the life events of the convict.⁶
- Literature writings: fiction, poetry, prose and drama.
- Correspondence based on personal and official, but also including written correspondence to obtain data in the form of questionnaires. This type of prison notes might be adapted more popularly (Abbott, 1991) or more in the form of scientific, academic research (Halliwell et al., 2022).

⁵ In the second case, it might be contested the writings belong to the genre of prison writings, but it is possible to consider it as such in case of broader understanding of the term.

⁶ For more about this type of qualitative research check: Flynn, 2015; Marland, 2019.

- Prison files and records are the type of prison notes that are mostly used as background information rather than as a main theme and source in research. However, we can find examples of research quite focused on this type of source such as a doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Liverpool by Madeleine Rungius *Thinking the Prison Affectively: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Official Prison Reports from Three English Prisons* (2022).
- Blogs and popular journal essays written by convicts are quite popular genre of prison writing and there are projects devoted to publishing regular prison blog entries written by the inmates such as Inmate Blogger⁷, WriteAPrisoner⁸, or Prison Journalism Project.⁹
- Artefacts and visual material containing text (graffiti, even marginal annotations in books and manuscripts are a well-acknowledged genre of prison notes analysed in the literature. See: Ahnert, 2013, p. 32).¹⁰
- Videos and voice recordings containing verbal and textual material
- Non-fiction literature in social and political science, but also thoughts concerning prison reform and analysis of the system of punishment and its damaging effect on the mental condition of the convicts (Marland, 2019). This type of the genre includes writings of the political prisoners and thought about the prison reform, while some authors identify the genre of prison notes with the writings of the political prisoners which often also include writings belonging to social activism and quest for social justice (Morsy, 2023). This includes also secondary literature on the prison writings and literature reviews of literature about qualitative research based on prison notes.
- Prison literature is a genre in certain areas or historical periods (Ahnert, 2013; Morsy, 2023).
- Collective prison writing practices (such as creative writing).
- As an alternative to prison sentence.¹¹

⁷ See: Inmate Blogger. (2024, 24 October). <https://inmateblogger.com/>.

⁸ See: WriteAPrisoner.com. (2024, 24 October). <https://writeaprisoner.com/inmate-blogs>.

⁹ See: Prison Journalism Project. (2024, 24 October). <https://prisonjournalismproject.org/>.

¹⁰ Prison graffiti are one of the most common textual way the prisoners use to express themselves. Since the ancient times, the practices of not only writing but also engraving and inscribing names into the walls of the prison cells has been one of the most common practices in prisons. Analyses of these graffiti, from both ancient but also contemporary times, not only as texts but also as form of art, could be challenging and inspiring research project. Analyses of this type of qualitative sources are quite present among the prison research literature (see for example: (Costanzo et al., 2013; Fiume & García-Arenal, 2018).

¹¹ In the US, for example, there is a program called *Changing Lives Through Literature* (CLL) in which prisoners are serving a sentence by attending the literature course instead of spending time in prison. What is even more interesting about this alternative, the prisoners attending literature course rather than serving prison sentence demonstrated a lower degree of recidivism comparing to those who served sentence in prison, proved by the follow up study (Colvin, 2015, p. 213).

Providing this typology helps us imagine what sort of research and research questions could be applied to retrieve valuable knowledge about all sort of the aspects of the imprisonment experience and what sort of findings and conclusions could be derived from it. From this simple overview only, we see that these kinds of sources could tell us much more about the prison experience than any other procedure or approach could, from the deeply individualized and contextualized perspective that will help us project much more policy-relevant proposals about the needed regulation and policy changes that would make resocialization and reintegration of the (formerly) incarcerated individuals more successful. However, there are many other, such as scientific and artistic, values of insights obtained from qualitative sources.

Textual and Discourse Analysis – Definition and an Example

The main and most well-known methodological techniques in qualitative research are text and discourse analysis framed and named in numerous similar ways, such for example content analysis. Textual, narrative and thematic analysis are based on employing the technique of coding to retrieve patterns of the textual structure and organization. There are many variants of textual and discourse analysis, and they might come in combination with different sorts of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, depending on the choices, approach and point of view of the researcher. For example, one of the most prominent kinds of textual analysis is *critical discourse analysis* (CDA). CDA is the methodological framework of qualitative linguistic analysis of written texts that emerged in the 80s by a group of European linguists such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk. The focus of CDA is to look for the subtle ways in which unequal power relations are maintained and reproduced using language (Given, 2008).

For example, in a paper from 2021 *Penitentiary Space Through the Eyes of Prisoners – An Examination of Prison Letters. The Relevance of Place* Polish penitentiary pedagogist Sławomir Grzegorz Grzesiak uses prison letters to retrieve the perception of prison space from the side of the prisoners (2021). He uses symbolic interactionism, place pedagogy and grounded theory to frame his analysis of 26 ($N = 26$) letters. This analysis highlighted the importance of how functioning of people is determined by space in the prison cells and in the end offered many findings helpful for taking the rehabilitation needs more seriously into consideration in the future.

However, there are risks to using prison notes as a source of qualitative research data on life in prison that should be highlighted too. Most prominent is the problem of subjectivity, as the producers of prison notes are, generally, incarcerated. There is always a shade of doubt surrounding the subjective, autobiographical information obtained from the research participants and their

backgrounds and life courses. Above all, focusing on a tight, individual perspective fails to show a more general picture which is in many instances needed for drawing valid conclusions and deriving useful policy recommendations from them. Various other factors related to the vulnerability and position of the research participants might impose ethical dilemmas and considerations too. It started to be more common to speak about mixed methods, where the benefits of qualitative and quantitative research are joined together. However, there are research topics where one or another perspective seems more adequate for obtaining concrete findings and answering certain kinds of research questions, and this demonstrates how the approaches, despite different, could be mutually supportive while providing a view of some of the sides of the phenomenon. The advantages and specificities of the qualitative approach should be much more employed in the future, especially because of the practical aspect of much simpler organisation of the data collection, while the findings might considerably help and improve penological studies and practices.

Results and Conclusions

The main goal of this paper has been to provide an overview of the prison notes as a source of qualitative research, qualitative methodological tools most suitable to employ on this type of source and data, to provide an overview of the definition and classification of prison literature, and finally, to offer a simple overview of the advantages and disadvantages of the insights and conclusions coming from these types of research sources and following methodologies. One overall and undoubtful conclusion regarding why qualitative research based on prison writing is important and relevant is the authenticity of the representation of the experience of survival behind prison bars which is being represented carefully. At the same time, this contributes to the sophisticated opportunity to make the imprisoned writer more visible not only as an entertainer of the mass culture but also as a reliable voice that could help us understand better the phenomenon of incarceration and the phenomenology of the legal public punishment system (Kelly, 2020).

One of the crucial motives for attempting to provide a qualitative inspection into the phenomenon of imprisonment experience is “to give voice to people with experience in the criminal justice system” (Estep 2023, p. 4). Understanding the effects of imprisonment from the insider point of view and providing the sense of the agency to the incarcerated while putting their cases in perspective is the main quality of findings based on qualitative data collection and interpretation procedures. This type of result resonates more strongly with the principle of social justice since taking us more into the human aspect of criminal acts and the issues relevant to the future reintegration of convicts in society. All this information is given in the autobiographical context, connected to the circumstances and life

story of the convict, which rarely could be visible from the type of research framed in a positivistic and quantitative framework.

On the other hand, qualitative methods have their risks, too, which is above all the subjective character of data which may not be reliable and trustworthy. The chances and opportunities to cross-check the information given in these writing is small, while on the other hand, the mental state of the imprisoned person is often sensitive and unstable, which distort perceptions (Marland, 2019). Sometimes the stories of convicts are transferred several times, through a couple of sources who contribute their interpretations to the story and therefore made modifications and possible falsifications. However, more than once testimonials from the prison given by the prisoners themselves became massively relevant and popular for understanding not only the phenomenon of incarceration, but also for understanding the social and political context and main challenges of that time. In the future this type of sophisticated insight will be more and more popular and demanded, therefore since education for it could be demanding and lasting, it is important to think systematically about how to make scholars more capable to use it and institutions of higher education better equipped for providing the relevant training for its usage.

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