

Conducting Research in a Collateral Institution: Lessons from the Field

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Abstract

This paper highlights the methodological and ethical challenges that a researcher should be prepared for when interviewing inmates in a collateral institution. While the paper uses the findings of the research carried out among convicted male sexual offenders, the lessons learnt should be useful to researchers conducting studies on inmates in general. In emphasizing the important role played by research, the paper argues that researchers' flexibility in the field and the way they respond and handle challenges faced along the way would, in essence, dictate their success or failure in acquiring relevant data to answer the research question(s). While bearing in mind that numerous challenges face researchers and may not have been exhaustively discussed here, this paper provides some critical insights into conducting prison research in Kenya.

Key words: Collateral institution, field, research, sexual offenders

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Introduction

The importance of researching sexual violence among offenders is in order to gain insight into the motivations and factors that could predispose men to committing sexual crimes. This kind of research can be seen as contributing to public safety and risk reduction in terms of designing interventions to stop sexual violence at the primary level. As pointed out by Hearn *et al.* (2007), the research findings may also contribute to policy development including policies focusing on non-convicted perpetrators.

This paper draws lessons from a study investigating factors predisposing men to commit acts of rape in Kenya (Muchoki 2008). The main objective of the study was to

investigate the individual motivations and socio-cultural factors that predispose men to acts of rape. The study sample was drawn from three maximum security prisons – Kamiti, Naivasha and Nyeri – located in Nairobi, Naivasha and Nyeri respectively. What is common to the three prisons is that in their custody are inmates with diverse criminal charges, including robbery with violence, murder and rape.

Interviewing offenders in prison presents a number of challenges for a researcher. This is because the research raises a number of methodological and ethical issues that the investigator needs to be aware of. As Seldess and Schoua-Glusberg (2004) observe, at first glance, it may seem like a researcher's dream: you know exactly where your entire sample is, there is no need to locate respondents, and even gaining cooperation from your study subject may not be too difficult. However, as

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pointed out by Hearn *et al.* (2007), embarking on research on perpetrators, and in this case offenders of sexual violence, should not be undertaken without careful forethought, preparation, attention to motivation, ethics, and dissemination, and where possible, support. The challenges encountered during this study emanated at different stages of the study; choosing the study site, designing research tools, sampling, data collection, interviewing inmates and presenting the research finds all presented their own problems.

Methodological challenges

Doing research in a collateral institution calls for advance planning due to inmate access restrictions. Research produced within such a setting runs the possibility of being subverted by the operational priorities and political practicalities facing the institution. Thus, it is important for an investigator to secure permits from all relevant authorities beforehand for ease of planning the fieldwork. This is also deemed necessary in order to avoid the last minute rush and give enough time for change of plans or follow-up if the permits are not granted.

Designing of research tools may also pose a major challenge to a researcher. The main issue which challenged me before embarking on this study was whether my respondents could openly discuss with me the sexual crimes that led to their conviction or incarceration, in bearing in mind that these are 'shameful crimes' to commit. With no prior experience in this kind of research, I was troubled all the more by the fact that, discussion of sexual matters in most, if not all communities in Kenya, is a taboo (see for example, Menka, 2003).

Formulating the questionnaire and making myself comfortable in administering them

was not an easy process. To start, I had to structure the items and familiarize myself with them. Some of these questions were very sensitive and somehow embarrassing to ask since they required the respondents to recall specific rape episode(s). While perusing the questionnaire, I had to constantly ask myself if I was comfortable with the items and whether my language was appropriate in addressing my research questions and not too intrusive to embarrass my respondents. Working out these was a protracted exercise and my supervisor came in handy in refining the questions as well as in preparing me psychologically to the task ahead.

When formulating the research questions, a researcher needs to start with general questions like the socio-demographic characteristic of the respondent and introduce the 'heavier' questions later on. This facilitates a good rapport with your respondent. As Scully (1990) suggests, an interview can be started with less threatening topics and gradually build up to more sensitive areas of the participants' sexual history and details of their current sexual offence. In addition, it is important for investigators to give out their research tools for peer review after preparing the tools. This process enables them to get a critique which would assist in improving the tools in order to ensure that they capture data that answer the research questions. It also enables the researcher to think through the items and gain confidence in administering the questionnaire.

Though I had a well thought out sampling procedure which I was to follow, I found out that there were no available records that could be used in constructing a sampling frame in two of the three prisons. My expectations were that I would get updated records for all the inmates in every prison. Thus, it was

necessary to rework my sampling design. Consequently, different sampling procedures had to be employed in order to come up with a study sample in each of the three prisons.

The total number of inmates convicted of rape and attempted rape in Nyeri (at King'ong'o) Main Prison, as per the prison record book, was one hundred and thirty individuals. It was easier to construct a sampling from this record. The study utilized the simple random sampling procedure and twenty respondents were selected.

At Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, the situation was different. There were no records showing the total number of inmates convicted of rape or attempted rape at the time of the study. Since it was difficult, to construct a sampling frame for these inmates, the researcher relied on the officer to randomly identify any prisoners known to him who had been convicted of rape or attempted rape. In total, twelve prisoners were identified. I encountered a similar challenge at the Naivasha Maximum Security Prison. According to the Social Welfare Officer at the prison, there were about six hundred inmates charged with rape or attempted rape at the time. Due to lack of any records that could have been used to identify their exact numbers, all the inmates charged with rape or attempted rape were requested by the officer to gather in one hall. Each inmate was then given an identification number. The lottery method was then used to select forty respondents.

Assisting me were the Social Welfare Officers who would bring in one respondent at a time. I did not face any major difficulty while collecting data at Kamiti Maximum Prison unlike in the other two. At Nyeri Prison I was able to interview eight respondents during the first two days. However, on the third day, I started realizing that the in-

formation the subsequent respondents were giving me seemed to be similar: their family background, level of education, and the reasons they attributed to their committing rape. To me, it seemed as if the earlier respondents had been sharing the research information with those who had not yet been interviewed. Curious about this new development, I inquired from the officer whether the respondents had been placed in the same room while awaiting the interview, and whether after the interview, they mixed with those who had not been interviewed. The answer was in the positive. By the time I was interviewing my twelfth respondent, it was clear to me that they (respondents) were sharing the information and, somehow, I was now getting similar responses to my questions. With the population of the inmates in the prison being small, word had spread by the end of the second day that there was a researcher who wanted to know why men rape. I realized that I had failed to protect my respondents' privacy since other inmates were aware of my research and that any inmate I was interviewing was known to be a sexual offender. With this conclusion, I decided not to continue with the interviews in that particular prison. But while going to the next prison, I was wiser to ensure that this did not repeat itself.

At Naivasha Maximum Security Prison I informed the Social Welfare Officer of the challenges I had encountered earlier on and the importance of not mixing the respondents interviewed with those that had not yet been interviewed. With this strategy, I had a successful data collection period at this prison.

Within seven days, I was done with administering the structured questionnaire. However, I realized that there was a special category of inmates that had been left out in the study and that I had not incorporated in