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Reflexivity of discomfort: two women outsiders doing sport research in prison

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When analyzing social relationships the idea of intersectionality allows for multiple dimensions to be brought forth. In this regard, discomfort becomes the core element of a reflective exercise surrounding the ethnographic fieldwork carried out by two young, white, female researchers as volunteers of sports and physical activities for imprisoned women. Through the analysis of our field notes, we complete a retrospective journey to analyze our presence in the field and bring forth the consequences of our decisions and emotions; all with the help of our adult, white, male PhD supervisors. In our analysis, gender, age, race and, in this particular context, the position of freedom and our condition as volunteers have been revealed to be fundamental. As researchers, we opted for using different strategies such as adapting our language or repressing our feminist ideas, in a complicated game of balance between the need to establish rapport and the necessary prudence in prison. All in all, this study highlights the richness of team research and its help in facing and understanding the various difficulties that arise from the prison context, its emotional implications, and the ethical dilemmas that appear during the research process. On the other hand, it constitutes a methodological and reflective contribution to feminist research in the field of sport and physical activity.

Keywords: physical activity, sport, ethnography, team research, prison.

Introduction

This article aims to concisely narrate our research on imprisoned women and their relationship with sports and physical activity, from an intersectional (Davies, 2008) self-reflective perspective and multilinear point of view. In other words, we propose to talk

about the research process itself, embodied by two young, white, female researchers in their role as sports volunteers in prison once the results of our research have been presented, or once we have told 'the story of the contribution to knowledge that research has made' (Farrant, 2014: 461). Farrant herself sums up this approach like this: ‘In this story, we hear about the concerns, fears, thrills, and frustrations involved in the research process’ (2014: 461). In this sense, reflexivity is understood as a look at the research process itself, an introspective exercise that differs from the traditional explanation of the results. As Hamdan (2009) explains, reflexivity would be equivalent to a metaphysical analysis of our own research to, pay attention to our intervention in all phases of the study and, to evaluate the impact that this action has had on the same. This being the case, we believed it was convenient, as Crewe (2014) advises, to look back and evaluate the decisions we made during the fieldwork sometime after the study had been completed. Among other things, this retrospection allows, as Rowe (2014) suggests, to induce new meanings and learning that in the first instance were hidden. However, although we have taken time to reflect and write about our discomforts in the field after the study was completed, reflexivity has been present throughout the whole process of the doctoral theses.

It is true that these reflective processes are, to a certain extent, normal in qualitative research (Pillow, 2003), given that it is the people themselves who investigate the main tools in fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Reflexivity invites us to evaluate the subjectivity of our data (Pillow, 2003) and power imbalances that exist between researchers and participants (Vadeboncoeur, Bopp and Singer, 2020). However, they are not so in the field of prison research, in which the most emotional aspects that fieldwork entails have been historically and until relatively recently hidden or ignored

(Garrihy and Watters, 2020; Jewkes, 2014; Waters et al., 2020) including those related to gender (Jewkes, 2012).

This text has a lot to do with gender, the 'main tools' of research were after all Nagore and Nerian, two doctoral students, now doctors, who conducted a microethnography (Wolcott, 1990) with female prisoners who carried out sports and physical activities sessions once a week under their direction as volunteers. This active leisure project for imprisoned women took place in a high security Spanish prison from November of 2016 to December of 2018. During the field work, we had the opportunity to carry out observations during 65 different days, with a total of 130 hours. More information about this study can be obtained at Martín-Gonzalez et al. (2019) and Martinez-Merino et al. (2019), or by consulting the doctoral theses directly (Martinez-Merino, 2018; Martín-Gonzalez, 2020).

Nagore and Nerian are two young white women, with a university education in Sports and Physical Activity Sciences. We are, in a certain way, privileged compared to the prisoners (Adams, 2021) and, by and large, outsiders doing prison research.

Making this personal information explicit is in line with the warning that 'race, class and gender always matter' (Phillips and Earle, 2010: 366) and is a specific attempt to respond to Jewkes' (2012) claim cited above, by providing a 'gender' approach to prison studies. In this sense, adopting a gender perspective makes this research a feminist study (Cooky, 2016). In this effort, much of what follows deals with our emotions during the doctoral research process as Waters et al. (2020) have done, but we do not want to fall into the cliché, explicit by Jewkes (2012), that it is women who usually deal with these topics. In our case, being women allowed, to a certain extent, to reduce the distance with female prisoners, which is worth taking into consideration. Thus, the reflexive explanation of our emotions, far from being a stereotyped action, happens to be a feminist

strategy (Hamdan, 2009). In this regard, we agree with Crewe (2014) that laying out the relationship of our emotions with the data from our study is not an easy task; in fact, any research in and about prison is not an easy task (Norman, 2018) and even less so when it comes to carrying out an ethnography (Ugelvik, 2014). For this reason, we have considered it necessary to close the cycle with this exercise in transparency and reflexivity (Bosworth, 1999). Thus, inspired by the argument of Crewe (2014), we have decided to relativize the complexity of this task with the help of two colleagues, in this case, the directors of our doctoral theses: Oidui and Daniel. Two men.

Oidui has been the director of our study on a day-to-day basis, due to proximity. He was our teacher in the Research Master's degree that leads to doctoral studies, and, therefore, our first contact with the research world. On the other hand, Daniel only participated occasionally, given the distance between him and the study's location. They are both white males, with a PhD and with a proven teaching and research career. Moreover, Daniel has had solid experience in prison research, as evidenced by his publications (Martos-Garcia, 2005; Martos-García et al. 2009a, 2009b; Martos-García and Devís-Devís, 2015, 2017). These publications, as an extension of his person, have accompanied us as a reference throughout our investigation.

Along the same lines as proposed by Lichterman (2017), this ethnography questioned both the social positions of the two researchers who undertook the field research and the interpretive reflections of the four authors. Regarding positional reflexivity, before starting the ethnography and during it, the entire research team met every month to reflect about the fieldwork. This constant dialogue focused on power hierarchies (i.e., gender, age, race, or freedom situation) and the academic habitus of the researchers. During the ethnography and, a posteriori, in a more interpretive practice of reflexivity, the units of meaning noted down by the two researchers in their field-notes

diary were rescued to carry out a group interpretation. Through this form of interpretive reflexivity practice, in which the emotions of the two field researchers were considered, the transparency of the analysis process increased.

The collaborative character of this text is therefore the logical consequence of a collective effort between two researchers and the two PhD directors, first in the preparation of the study itself and, finally, in explaining the reasons for our discomfort as researchers in the context of prison. In the field of sports and physical activity sciences, there have been other works that have been the product of group conversations (Dowling et al., 2015; Olive and Thorpe, 2011) or debates surrounding diverse narratives (Lozano-Sufrategui and Carless, 2017). In terms of prison research there have also been cases of similar articles written in collaboration (Damsa and Ugelvik, 2017).

Discomfort in research as an object of reflection

Having highlighted the need to establish reflective exercises on our own research, it seems pertinent to point out that the danger, in these cases, may lie in the fact of appearing self-indulgent, candid, innocent, for which Pillow (2003) encourages to navigate the complicated domain of discomfort. In this effort, the same author explains how it is necessary to use reflexivity of discomfort, not only as a way to obtain "better data" (Pillow 2003, p.180), but also as a way to deal with the complex situations that qualitative research entails. In this same line, others have agreed to value the explicitness of discomfort in studies of sport sciences as a strategy to question our role, actions or decisions in the field of study (Hill and Dao, 2021; Lucas and Jeanes, 2020; Olive and Thorpe, 2011). In the prison setting, there is no shortage of female researchers who have reported episodes of harassment and discomfort that they have experienced, more or less intensely, during their fieldwork (Adams, 2021; Claes et al., 2013; Gibson-Light and

Seim, 2020; Scheirs and Nuytiens, 2013; Sivakumar, 2021). However, reflexivity of discomfort is an almost unprecedented exercise regarding studies about sports and physical activity in the prison context, more so if possible, with women as the protagonists.

White, young, and 'clean' outsider women: a long way from prison

> Checking our IDs, the official immediately asks us, *Hey, aren't you too young to go in there?* We answer with humor. *Young? How old do you think we are? ... and by the way it's not the first time we've been here. I'm 26, I tell him, and I'm 29, says Nerian.* He checks our IDs and says oh, okay, okay, you just look younger... he answers us (Field-notes, 30-11-2016).

The previous exchange could be overlooked as a mere anecdote. However, the fact that it was a recurring comment from male officials and directed at two young women, sparked our "scientific" intuition. That intuition referred by Liebling et al. (2021), to verify that, indeed, it was not a simple anecdote. Our experience in this regard bears a certain similarity to that of Bosworth (1999) who stated that during her fieldwork in prison she was questioned about being a 'proper' researcher because of her age and her status as a student. It seems obvious that age may have a significant impact in the field and that young and female researchers are not seen as proper grown-up professionals (Damsa and Ugelvik, 2017: 6), specially, if the field of study is such delicate as prison.

Entering prison is clearly a disturbing experience (Phillips and Earle, 2010), it is a special and even potentially dangerous context due to the emotional load that comes with it (Liebling, 1999). Thus, in this whirlwind of emotions, race or ethnicity (Phillips and Earle, 2010), gender (Claes et al., 2013; Crewe, 2014; Jewkes, 2012), class and sexual orientation (Wincup, 2001) and, as we also see, age, play their role. Following what was

exposed by Foucault (1988, 2009), in our case we felt the power of adult-centrism reproduced in the officials' paternalism that questioned our age, and closely connected to the gender intersection, questioned how and why two young white women wanted to go inside prison.

Despite we were sport volunteers, it seems obvious that prison is not a place to go to play and have fun. Opposite to Damsa and Ugelvik (2017) who reported how the younger author had to work harder to gain respect as she was seen as "just a student", we took advantage of our status as PhD students, at least with the inmates. As we were sport volunteers, we felt it helped us to get closer to prisoners as a sport monitor can be connected to a young age and feel respected even being young. However, we were aware that for prison's officials -as we were not even 30- we were too young to go to prison, and maybe from their adulcentrist point of view, we were not prepared to see everything we could see and hear in there. Because of that, we used to repeat in our small conversations in the entry that we were used to come and that it was not "our first day", solely to remark that we had some expertise in the field and gain their approval.

In a certain way, during the research process we have been aware of our intersections and, why not, of our privileges (Wincup, 2001); in both cases we have felt uncomfortable. It turns out that being white, "clean" (that is, not using drugs), or not being imprisoned are privileges that are obvious and that, inescapably, mark the stay in prison. Thus, we have felt uncomfortable when conversations have revolved around freedom, freedom that we ourselves enjoy:

> It's time to leave, I start to say goodbye to the girls, Daniela shows me her card and points at my pass: *'Hey, can we exchange them? Come on, you stay here for a week, and I'll come back next week and we change again'* she says to me, half-jokingly, half seriously. *'Emm… I think we don't look much alike and that they will figure it*

> *out from the photo'* I reply with a smile, trying to get out of the conversation as best as possible (Field-notes, 09-03-2018).

> The girls hand over their cards and the official asks me: *And you? No, I don't…* I start telling him. *She is from the street,* the girls answer quickly. *(O.C.[1] That's what we are to them, street people, different)* (Field-notes, 21-06-2017).

Frequently, our entry in the module made the inmates uncomfortable because it reminded them of precisely that, their confinement, in contrast to our freedom. Hill and Dao (2021) explained how they felt discomfort when returning to a community they belonged to but from the privilege of return as researchers. In our case, the privilege was the fact of being able to go out and come back in. In addition, we must not forget that, in a certain way, we entered their house, their dwelling, and we could not help but feel that our presence bothered them. Some hard looks or simply signs of inattention made us feel, at times, like intruders violating their space:

> I have a strange feeling today, perhaps because the module was 'stirred', but it does not seem that they liked our visit, nor did they dislike it, it is as if we became something invisible, or that they did not want to see us. Sometimes certain uncomfortable situations arise in which I think we can bother them, perhaps because they do not want to participate in our sessions or because they are not interested in our presence. I don't know to what extent they appreciate it on days like today. It makes me a little sad to leave with this bad feeling (Field-notes, 18-01-2017).

This dichotomy of imprisoned and free bothered us greatly and forced us, in a certain way, to find ways to get closer to them. In this regard, one of the most common ways of approaching participants, especially in prison, is through favours, as explained by Martos-Garcia et al. (2022):

[1] Observer comments (O.C.)

> *Hey, I have to ask you a favour, could you call a number for me? Look, I want to talk to my husband, but if my husband isn't there, I don't want them to answer the phone. Do you understand me? So, the thing would be that when you leave you call and whoever answers you tell them, that if my husband is not there, that they do not answer, if not, I will lose the call.* (Field notes, 04-01-2017).

The list of favours has been varied and, at times, long. In these cases, Daniel's experience led him to advise us not to miss the opportunity to strengthen rapport, but to take every precaution to, on the one hand, control requests and, on the other, limit them. We cannot deny that the issue of favours generated a certain fear and respect in us. In this sense, we immediately realized that the word spread quickly in prison and this led to new requests. This anxiety regarding what could happen and not knowing how to act when confronted with these situations -especially because we knew that we were bordering on the line of prison regulations- made us act and seek help to settle them. Faced with this situation, we consulted our volunteer association which gave us coverage for entering prison, and they told us that we should refer all the requests to them. In this way, we solved what we sensed could become a big problem.

Not only our status as volunteers has been the reason for some discomfort, but race and ethnic has also played an important role specially with the Roma Community. In Spain approximately one in four female prisoners are Romani (Naredo, 2004). As white researchers, we could not ignore this condition and following Vadeboncoeur et al. (2020) we reflected on the power relations between us and Roma prisoners would call us *payas*[2]. It was clear that we were different from them and for us they constituted a key group for gaining participants for our project. Faced with the ethnic question, we had to adopt some strategies that would allow us to get closer to them, such as paying attention to what we

[2] Spanish word used by Roma people to refer to those who are not one of them

wore, behaving, or even speaking, as recommended by Crewe (2014) or Martos-Garcia and Devís-Devís (2017):

> Calling Andrea "aunt" was something I hadn't thought about, it just came up, and its effect has been interesting. On the one hand, all the Roma girls call her aunt, and I'd even say that many of the non-Roma girls in the module do so as well. It is a nickname that shows familiarity, at the same time that it indicates her role within the module, that of an aunt, the one who takes care of everyone a little, and whom they treat with a lot of respect. The fact that I, a *paya*, as they would say, and also 'from the street' called her aunt, it seems that they liked it. Adriana laughed, I suppose out of surprise, but Andrea, the aunt, smiled and I think that, in this way, I have shown some complicity and respect. I don't know, I think that with some inmates we are building a nice 'relationship' (Field-notes, 17-05-2017)

However, on many other occasions the approach strategy has been to manage our discomfort through silence or biting our "feminist tongue", as Olive and Thorpe (2011) did, in the face of sexist situations, such as the fact that they could not go out to the sports center *"because there are men, and her husband does not allow it"* (Field notes, 01-14-2017). This decision is consistent with the one adopted by Daniel in his ethnography in prison (Martos-Garcia et al., 2022), and involved consciously ignoring and hiding our feminist position as researchers (Wincup, 2001). As our priority was to encourage women to practice some sports, built rapport and create a safe and empathetic environment with them, we tried to avoid ideological conflicts. For that reason, we opted to remain silent, to avoid being judgemental and try to understand through our white privilege the culture of Roma community and respect their choices. For us it was a clear injustice that they were not "allowed" to go to the sports center and it made us angry, however, we also knew that it was not "our battle" neither our priority as we went like sport volunteers.

This brings to the table what is surely the most influential variable that notably affects the future of female researchers in prison, gender. Prison is after all a space

characterized by hegemonic masculinity (Claes et al., 2013) and a patriarchal punitive power (Restrepo and Francés, 2016). In this sense, Jewkes (2012) explicitly addressed the need to consider the influence exerted by the gender of the researcher and the gender of the subject of research, in an androcentric environment. Following this appeal, Crewe (2014), for example, delved into the homosocial relationships between the male researcher and the male prisoner population. In our case, we try to do the same, but from the female point of view.

As women, entering a prison was an experience full of discomfort and emotional intensity. Without being the object of explicitly sexist comments, as reported by Claes et al. (2013), we could feel the stares of the male prisoners on our bodies, whistles that were certainly demeaning and calls as implicitly sexist as the rudest of all possible comments. Why not say it, we recognize that we felt helpless and a relative fear on many occasions:

> We keep going and pass by the men's modules, where we see several of them sitting on the window with their legs outside the bars talking from one module to another. As soon as we pass by, the commotion begins. *Eeeeeeeeh, giiiiirls!* Followed by whistles and banging on the bars. The girls laugh and between them conclude '*men'*… (Field-notes, 21-06-2017).

Like Adams (2021), fear had a significant presence in our research. Thus, beyond an individual interpretation of fear, we consider it appropriate at this point to adopt a more generic and social perspective, as explained by Monforte and Pérez-Samaniego (2017), that attends to the relational aspect that is generated in a context such as prison. The fact that two young white women walked alone through the long corridors of the prison nourished not only our felt fear but also an inevitable and androcentric fondness for the officials who, apparently, were watching from a distance: once again paternalism entered on stage.

In this effort to manage our fears, alone, many times we quickened our pace when some prisoners would approach us at the prison exit, trying to ignore him; on other occasions, we would get nearer to some of our prisoner "friends" (such as those in charge of the sports center) to get away from awkward looks or silences with other male prisoners. Although Sivakumar (2021) tries to explain these events by addressing the fact that relationships with people of the opposite sex are rare in prison, it is still a source of intense discomfort, as she herself experienced.

However, the uncomfortable situations based on our own position and gender did not only occur with men, but with the female prisoners themselves. It is true that, on the one hand, being women brought us closer to them (Claes et al., 2013) because we shared a certain 'sisterhood' (Wincup, 2001) that facilitated rapport. But, on the other hand, it was revealed to us that it was somewhat difficult to maintain the balance between the need to get closer and an excess of confidence by the female prisoners. As reported by Scheirs and Nuytiens (2013), on occasions some of them would show signs of interest in us beyond sports:

> Nagore looks at me and tells me that it's late and that we should go. I reply that '*we have to go in case they leave us in here'* to which Diana replies, as she has let me know on other occasions, that if it were up to her, they could just leave me here, that she would make room for me in her cell, that we were going to have a good time (Field-notes, 4-06-2018).

It may happen that feminist researchers maintain a close and accessible position towards other women (Oakley, 2016), which often leads to difficulties in maintaining distance between the subject and the researcher (Wincup, 2001). As De Miguel-Calvo (2021) stated, for imprisoned women, love is a fundamental pillar of resistance, a symbolic experience of freedom, in which partner relationships become a source of positive identity in prison. As women, we felt some rapprochement attempts by some female inmates. In

our experience, although they created small uncomfortable moments, the insinuations or comments from them were always in a joking tone. Once adapted to the context in which we felt more comfortable, we answered them also with jokes, or even encouraged them to be more physically active.

Along these lines, Bosworth (1999) also pointed out the difficulties that arise in fieldwork when we empathize a lot with the participants, which can trigger situations beyond our control. The relationships and interactions between female and male researchers are complex and dynamic, even more so in prison, where gender plays a relevant role (Claes et al., 2013).

All these events lead us to reflect on the hackneyed concepts of insiders and outsiders as we have noted before. Thus, while our status as women facilitated access to the female prisoners, it is true that not being convicted or, for example, not belonging to the Roma group, nuanced the achieved rapport. On many occasions in which we managed with ease among the group of incarcerated athletes, the harsh treatment we received from some of the Roma prisoners brought us back to reality, reminding us that ethnicity also count (Philips and Earle, 2010). From an intersectional point of view, it is evident that it is impossible to match all the variables that one can find in heterogeneous groups; with a lot of effort and the skills of ethnography, it is possible to achieve a certain identity (Jewkes, 2012; Martos-Garcia and Devis-Devis, 2017). However, in our case, we never stopped being ‘the ones from the street', the ones who went home after the activities and 'left them locked up there'. It is true that, as Fine and Torre (2006) recount, we managed to create a warm atmosphere among us, a sense of community that allowed us to hold conversations on various topics, share concerns, and so on. However, beyond this there was still a barrier that separated us, the bars, which inexorably marked the difference between the prisoners and us, the free ones. This fact, as Martos-Garcia and Devis-Devis

(2017) explains, has crept into every daily moment, into every comment, recalling the omnipresence of their sentences, permanently threatening the closeness achieved.

The sports center: uncertainty, tensions, and a whirlwind of emotions

If we had to define our experience in prison with one word, what for Martos-Garcia et al. (2022) was boredom, for us, without a doubt, was uncertainty. The uncertainty of not knowing what we were going to find when we arrived at the sports center, of the people who would participate in each activity, of whether or not we could carry out the planned session, of whether or not there would be enough material or an updated list, of the overall mood that we would encounter, of how our performance would turn out. To give an example, a factor of uncertainty in prison is introduced by the security personnel: *'today we have a bad security officer'* (Fieldnotes 05-24-2017), said an inmate one day when seeing who was in the sentry box. Thus, on many occasions, the official on duty left the booth to call out the girls who were sitting or to object when it came to providing material, referring to the low number of participants. Recurrently, although often subtly, the prison reminds prisoners of its domination over them (Foucault, 1995; Gibson-Light and Seim, 2020).

At this point, it is worth taking into account Wolcott's (2005) warnings about the impossibility of anticipating exactly what one will find in the fieldwork; the prison seems to multiply all the uncertainties and, therefore, turns the research task into a confusing activity (Liebling, 1999). Thus, our field diaries are full of annotations detailing the materialization of said uncertainty which, more or less intensely, accompanied us until the end:

> The structured unstructuring of the sessions is something that I am learning to deal with, something that always gives me a good degree of uncertainty and consequently aggravates my insecurity… On the way we talk about the possibility of today's

> session to which we conclude 'Let's see what we encounter…' (Field-notes, 5-07-2017)
>
> I'm calm, I don't know, it's as if I have gotten used to it or the uncertainty that we used to have has dissipated (Field-notes, 23-11-2017).

In this situation, contrary to what was reported in the previous section, teamwork with our PhD supervisors was indeed useful for us, as recommended by Garrihy and Watters (2020) to, among other things, assess the inexorability of the environment and relativize our possibilities. In this regard, the previous experience of Daniel was very useful to us, who a time ago, had already experienced this discomfort. Along these lines, in his ethnography in the prison's sports center, he documented innumerable incidents and problems such as the lack of security personnel or sports equipment, the failure to update the lists, the poor attitude of the participating prisoners, more interested in having fun than in exercising, or the lack of institutional recognition of sports (Martos, 2005). With this information, our expectations as sports instructors were diluted and, little by little, we stopped planning and preparing physical activity sessions, which is actually not strange in prison (Devís-Devís et al., 2017). As reported by Hinojosa-Alcalde and Soler (2021) we also found it difficult to adjust the program for the needs and interest of women. Our stance towards these activities became more and more flexible, coming to improvise our performances and agreeing almost completely with the requests of our participants. Taking the idea of Bosworth (1999), we can say that we adopted a fluid posture or a researching as tinkering (Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer, 2021) position, although this colored our sessions with a certain disorder and even chaos. Reflecting with our supervisors, they recommended that we be flexible in the field, both in our role as volunteers and as researchers. In this sense, the fact that we were two researchers helped us, like it did Monforte and Ubeda-Colomer (2021), to support each other and be able to

divide ourselves between situations and spaces that we thought were interesting for research. For example, one of us could get involved in a more one-on-one intimate conversation with a prisoner, or due to the disparity of requests and interpersonal relationships between the prisoners as sports instructors we could separate so that some could go play soccer and others racquetball.

It must be taken into account that ‘sport and physical activity are afforded low status within the hierarchy of treatment activities on offer within the prison’ (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a: 86), what is usually behind all the problems that we have listed and that, almost irremediably, prevents the normal development of the activities that are proposed. In fact, it often happens that, prisoners learn what is important to obtain prison benefits, such as exit permits, and use participation in sports activities in this sense (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a). In the case female prisoners, specifically, we have been able to verify this extrinsic use in such a way that 'sport and physical activity can become manifestations of friction that lead to personal improvements in a hostile, often hopeless, environment' (Martinez-Merino et al., 2019: 228). We soon realized that many of the inmates came to our activities for reasons other than the ones we had anticipated:

> Just like loving someone for ulterior motives, I think hidden motives are fairly common in prison, as is the case of Aida who goes out to see her husband and then pays no attention to the session, Iris goes out to do her business, maybe Diana and Estefany go out simply to be able to see each other, or Kamila who comes to ask us for things about the apartment. This feeling somehow makes me mistrust, or puts me in a state of 'alert'. I think I try to take care of this aspect; I don't know if it comes from pride or mistrust, but I don't want to have the feeling that they take advantage of me, which, in prison, is much more notable and visible. (Field-notes, 5-07-2017).

We must recognize that, as Wolcott (2005) warns, fieldwork is full of ethical dilemmas. In the case of prison, it presents itself in the perpetual uncertainty materialized in a constant fluctuation of emotions (Jewkes, 2012). One day we might leave with low spirits

and, the next, with a feeling of enormous personal fulfillment:

> We left pissed off and enraged. With the feeling that they tease us and boss us around, and the truth is that I don't like this feeling at all. The attitude that they were in a hurry to get out and then in a hurry to get back. This situation makes me angry. I don't know... today's feeling is very strange, a mixture of disappointment, impotence, and sorrow (Field notes, 09-29-2017).

In these cases, despite our anger, we must assume that the prisoners' behaviour obeys the punitive logic of the prison system (Foucault, 1995) and their need to survive in that environment and, why not, to resist (Martinez-Merino et al., 2019). However, there were days when we left the prison really satisfied:

> I have felt comfortable, knowing how to interact or how to play with them, what kind of gestures or jokes to make. Which in the module is not always so easy. I think that physical activity gives us an opportunity to relate more naturally, or in a way that is more familiar to me at least. Today's afternoon has flown by, and we haven't stopped at all, nor have we had that feeling that we didn't know what to do. I felt really comfortable (Field-notes, 31-05-2017).

The sessions in prison were, without a doubt, a whirlwind of emotions. Although playing or practicing sport with them or being corporally near helped us feel good and we could enjoy one hour in prison, we cannot ignore that the reflections about their stay in prison affected us greatly. Their testimonies of violence, drugs, sex, situations of abuse or suicide attempts, were conversations that came up almost daily during the microethnography. All of this upset our stomachs and made us create an emotional shield as stated by Bosworth (1999).

> As I realize that I am becoming more and more familiar with the environment, I question whether this is a good thing or a bad one… when, for example, Pam has told me about her suicide attempt and I have hardly been impressed... then I think about it, and it is really scary. I don't know if partly it is that we try to protect ourselves and we put as a

> kind of shield because if we fully empathized with them I might lose my mind or get depressed by everything I hear… or if, on the other hand, if I am somehow assuming everything as "normal" inside the prison, when it is not outside… could it be that we get emotionally used to contexts? I don't know... what is clear to me is that normality is not the same, and the things that happen are not either. (Field-notes, 14-09-2017).

Speaking with our supervisors, we realized that little by little we learned through the reflexivity process that we must distance ourselves emotionally once we got out of prison. As Wincup (2001) stated, the fieldwork in such emotionally charged situations, affected us and that is why we need some emotional distance. Firstly, for our own mental health and secondly, to be able to continue with the fieldwork.

Another discomfort experience in the sport center were the conflicts or situations of violence, especially when carrying out competitive activities. On those occasions, where there was tension or raised voices, it was not easy to mediate between the participants. However, these signs of conflict never reached the level of physical aggression, although for us they were clearly uncomfortable and stressful situations. As the ones responsible for the activity, we would try to maintain certain order. However, at the same time, we knew that they were deeper conflicts, due to the forced coexistence in conditions of stress and anxiety (Phillips and Earle, 2010), in which we felt like outsiders, volunteers without permission or status to say anything to them. In this sense, trying to avoid this situation and coinciding with the strategies used by gym workers in the study by Meek (2014), we took special care when forming groups, for example, trying to separate prisoners who were potentially conflictive or who did not have a good relationship. In the same way that Martos-Garcia and Devis-Devis (2017) recounts, we witnessed different cases of violence between women. On those occasions, we chose not to judge or vehemently oppose them, trying to remain neutral or act, as Wolcott (2005)

explains, with a certain diplomacy:

> Pam tries to explain herself, but Aida doesn't let her finish her sentence, so Pam begins to speak louder, among the prisoners there is a murmur and Aida again shows her bluntness towards Pam with a loud *shut up! (O.C. In that moment, even if I had told them to back off, I would not have achieved anything*). In a short time the tension has risen, and Judith tries to reassure Pam, but Pam doesn't stop talking and Aida doesn't stop answering. In the end, Pam storms off, slamming her hand hard on the door and walking off the field. Nerian has gone after her. *Don't bother, she's doing this to get attention,* one of the girls points out. The others remain silent, but they don't even flinch at what happened. *(O.C. They are used to conflicts…)* (Field-notes, 21-06-2017)

Another type of conflict, perhaps more subtle, is one that occurs with the male prisoners, also athletes, who demand their space and complain about the women's "boldness" for "taking away" their practice hours. In this sense, some of them did not hesitate to remind us that we "took away" their hour in the sports center, so "only" a few girls could go out. As women, we tried to show our empowerment in the face of the patriarchal attitudes we knew were common in the sports center, as explained before by Daniel (Martos-Garcia, et al., 2009a). Our reaction was to stop this type of comments and attitudes, seeking to gain some respect and strengthen the relationship with the women:

> As the men approach the material first, they take advantage of the moment to remind the women that they are taking away 'their' time from the 'racket selection'. *The girls only go out once a week*, I answer them firmly, not letting the comment pass, there, *it was just a joke*, points out the man (Field-notes, 14-06-2017).

All in all, it seemed that our entrance to the sports center required an over justification, which was not necessary in the case of the imprisoned men. This pressure generated some stress for us for fear of losing access to the sports center and, therefore, our sessions with the inmates; logically we felt controlled and watched in line with Fine and Torre (2006). In conclusion, we think that this sensation of panoptic surveillance (Foucault, 1995) over

each of our actions is not a coincidence, but rather responds to our condition as women volunteers in a hyper-normative context, who work with imprisoned women in an androcentric environment.

Conclusions

Through this introspective exercise of positional and interpretative reflexivity, we have tried to clarify our discomforts and our strategies when facing them during the research process. These strategies and moments of discomfort allude to our condition as women, young and white, investigating the context of sports in prison. However, it is not necessary for all these conditions to 'produce' unpleasant moments such as those described. Women doing ethnography have felt uncomfortable, even if it was not in prison; white men have reported negative emotions in prison. Our reflections are a few more, which try to delve into a greater understanding of the discomfort caused by fieldwork. This 'rich knowledge', following Smith (2018), is one of the strengths of this type of studies. In this sense, we have been able to verify, as others have done before, that our intersections, that gender, age and in this case, the status as a sports volunteer, and our freedom, have a marked influence both in prison research and on researchers themselves. A reflective attitude in a particular case not only makes it easier to adapt our roles as researchers in the future, but also shows other researchers how they can feel in similar, but not necessarily identical, fieldwork. Faced with intersectionality, we note the complicated game of balance that researchers play, which involves trying to collect data by reducing physical and emotional distances and the imponderables of prison. In this process we have been aware of the total power that the institution exercises, with its explicit and tacit norms, of how this power shapes the ethnographic procedure (Gibson-Light and Seim, 2020). In this situation, field strategies and on-site decisions have been

fundamental. Despite the existing literature on the matter, it seems obvious to think that it is certainly difficult to establish universal methodological parameters (Abbott et al., 2018). Therefore, as we have mentioned before, making these decisions explicit not only contributes to making our own research process transparent, but also increases its quality and can even help future researchers (Martos-Garcia et al., 2022; Ravindran et al., 2020).

In addition, these lines have served us to remember and explain our relationship with the discomfort that the prison research has caused us. Thus, we have been forced to take care of our behaving, to sometimes hide our feminist position, to disguise our privileges of "freedom", or to remain neutral in conflict situations. In short, we have given up being ourselves for the sake of research and, although the effort has been worth it, so is telling the story. From a feminist perspective, and following Cooky (2016), we have emphasized the importance of women's life experiences, in this case, as researchers. Surprisingly, there are not many examples of how to exercise reflexivity (Olive and Thorpe, 2011), even less so from an explicitly feminist position.

From the specific point of view of sport and physical activity, there are examples of feminist researchers who have highlighted the difficulties associated with specific ideological and epistemological positions, but few refer to their deployment in exercises of an ethnographic nature (Olive and Thorpe, 2011). In this sense, our arguments, explained in a reflexive way, are, we think, a contribution. We are with Cooky (2016) when she alludes to the need for more reflective texts from feminist research. The experience as prison volunteers has taught us to deal with uncertainty in the face of the difficulty (and almost impossibility) of planning and carrying out sports and physical activity sessions. Likewise, this fact has led us down a path full of constant ethical dilemmas, such as the existence of a powerful extrinsic motivation towards the participation of prisoners in sports and physical activities. In this sense, we recommend

to future sport researchers or sports volunteers to adopt a fluid or tinkering posture when facing the demands of prisoners related to the sport and physical activity session. From our experience, this fluid posture can be an act of empathy that we believe, could help getting closer to them.

In this process, the help of our supervisors has been fundamental, despite being men, especially since they themselves have traveled before us along the paths that we now faced. For example, the conversations and the works published by Daniel made it easier for us to face and understand most of the events that we were experiencing at that time. The group work has been satisfying, from start to finish, right up to this latest thoughtful effort. In a certain way, and looking back, the path travelled confirms our learning and, to a certain extent, our possibilities of emancipation as researchers.

From our experience, we believe it is appropriate to point out that people who want to do research should not do it alone, and even less so in prison. This way they can share their fears, problems, or concerns with someone (Scheirs and Nuytiens, 2013). We thus confirm the strength of ethnographic research going hand in hand with group reflection, this relationship being fundamental, even more so in intense and complicated contexts such as prison (Liebling et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2020).

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