Photo-elicitation in prison ethnography: Breaking the ice in the field and unpacking prison officers' use of force

(Article begins on next page)

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Abstract

Research papers on prisons have occasionally been illustrated with photographs. Yet rarely have visual methods been used critically in prison ethnography; image-making and images themselves have been used illustratively rather than as constitutive sites of knowledge production and, therefore, as objects to be interrogated in their own right by the researcher through, for example, participant collaboration. This paper focuses on the use of 'photo-elicitation' interviewing as a method for unpacking prison officers' use of force. The discussion is based on an ethnography conducted inside an Italian custodial complex that hosts both a forensic psychiatric hospital and a prison. Prison officers, psychiatric staff and prisoners were invited to discuss a number of images produced by the researcher–in the wing where they were working and/or living–representing the use of force and violence, thereby helping the researcher to address what Joe Sim (2008: 187) calls an 'inconvenient criminological truth' and at the same time giving the participants a voice.

Introduction

Photographs and other visual images are increasingly present in our daily lives and contribute to both shaping knowledge and making sense of the world. 'Crime images' represent a continuum in popular culture (Young, 2010: 1–20) and we frequently see photographs, documentaries, films, and video-clips about prisons. Custodial institutions—the keepers and the kept—are either protagonists or are only visible in the background of visual representations, which circulate both online and offline across time and geography. Prison ethnographers have long studied with custodial institutions, the keeper and the kept, in traditional and effective ways, and occasionally use photographs as illustrations.

This research note aims to challenge prison ethnographers to adopt 'a new methodological orientation towards the visual' (Hayward, 2010, quoted in Schept, 2014: 204), by integrating images and traditional ethnographic tools in the interview process through photo-elicitation. Photoelicitation interviews (PEIs) have a long history and were first outlined by Collier and Collier (1967). Generally, they are described as 'the use of photographs during the interview process' (Lapenta 2011: 201); PEIs can be designed as either an open-ended interview variation (Harper, 2002) or a semi-structured interview (Gariglio, 2010) such as the one presented in this paper. Furthermore, the ethnographer, the subjects, or both can produce the images that are used in the interview.

1

This research note seeks to intervene in the contemporary debate on visual images in criminology and sociology by exploring one crucial way in which photographs may contribute to prison ethnography (Gariglio, 2015a). By introducing the use of PEIs for prison-related research, I developed new knowledge and expanded the existing knowledge already obtained through observation (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011; Wagner, 1979). PEIs are particularly useful, as they introduce new layers of data into the research process, thereby facilitating new interpretations and generating 'thicker' (Geertz, 1973) prison ethnographies on the use of force.

Although I mainly focus on the PEI as a method in this paper, it is useful to briefly define 'officers' use of force'. I adopt the term 'use of force', as officers frequently used this expression when describing their own 'actions' during the PEIs; I comprehensively use this term to refer to the legitimate use of force, the excessive use of force, the use of excessive force, officer misconduct and abuse, and violence against inmates (Terrill, 2014). However, each term shall require more rigorous specification when addressing research outputs regarding prison officers' use of force (Gariglio 2016).

In the next sections, I will first introduce the fieldwork site; then, I will show how PEIs allowed officers a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. Finally, I will introduce the idea of visibility and show how PEIs help to investigate crucial concepts such as visibility, invisibility, and the normalising gaze.

Inside an Italian custodial complex

This ethnography was conducted between June 2013 and March 2015 in a custodial complex that was designed in the 1980s and opened in the 1990s in Reggio Emilia, Italy. This site included—in two identical buildings—two different custodial institutions: a forensic psychiatric hospital (OPG) and a prison (CC). Despite the different purposes of the two facilities, they were identical in architecture, interior design, and space organisation. Furthermore, prison officers were on duty at both facilities. Both facilities' detention wings and cells appeared to be the same. During my observations, between 30 and 38 prisoners were kept in 25 'individual' cells for a minimum of 30 days for at least 22 hours per day. Initially, I only conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews (Gobo, 2008), in which I observed not only prisoners' self-harm but also officer and medical first-aid interventions. On several occasions, I observed one or more prisoners physically fighting with officers assaulting them; however, those fights only had serious, permanent consequences on two occasions (the officers did not allow me to disclose those occasions). In that environment, the relationships between prisoners and custodians were very different from the decent, 'soft' interactions that were described by Ben Crewe (2009, in particular 99–115), which had occurred in Wellingborough, UK during his work. On a daily basis, the relationships between officers and prisoners were similar to the violent and antagonistic relationships that have been described in older critical prison ethnographies that represent very different times and geographies (Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Fitzgerald and Sim, 1979; Kauffman, 1988; Marquart, 1986).

Although coercion, self-harm, resistance, and assault were normal, doing ethnography on that wing did not initiate a dialogue with officers on the 'use of force'. Neither ethnographic nor qualitative interviews appeared to work properly. Whenever I attempted to introduce the topic of using force during informal conversations with officers, and without openly taking notes, I suddenly felt that suspicion towards me was growing. Even 'traditional' (non-visual), semi-structured, qualitative interviews did not work. This might have been because I was an outsider. The prison literature suggests that it is not easy for outsiders to address using force with officers (Kauffman, 1988). In this study, the PEI approach proved to be crucial; it allowed me to overcome the barriers that existed between the officers and me. This *quasi*-'non-directed method' (Lapenta, 2011) enabled officers to decide whether to speak with me about using force, and if so on what terms. The literature on visual methods suggests that PEI can

challenge semi-structured interviews in which there is a clear structural power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee. Although the social asymmetry in power is one key component of many daily social interactions or encounters (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), this asymmetry of power may be problematic in interview interactions because it can lead to the construction of very biased responses, specifically in interactions among prisoners, prison staff, and visitors. In this ethnography, the PEI data showed that the photographs, or in Barthes' (1977) terms, the processes of polysemy, allowed the discussant to introduce several interpretive layers. Moreover, they often empowered the interviewees and gave them more freedom both to take turns and to freely express their experiences. I now turn to PEI capacities to elicit respondent narrations that generate dialogue which extends far beyond what is visible from an image.

Photo-elicitation interview for a prison ethnography: Unpacking interpretations

As became evident while conducting the PEIs, the photographs revealed what was in front of the camera (Sontag, 1973), and the interviewees 'read' those photographs by describing what was visible in each photograph. In other words, the respondents conducted a personal reading of what was visible in each image. However, both this and the following section will only present examples of respondents' comments that reveal personal interpretations that extend far beyond image descriptions, and rather deal with connotation. The examples reveal how particular images encapsulated the officers' subjective understandings of the use of force in one particular fieldwork and interview situation.

The first photograph discussed in this section is Figure 1; this image played a crucial role as an ice-breaker (Lapenta, 2011) with respect to the 'officers' use of force'. Several officers interpreted this photograph as a sign of my interest in their status as victims. Some appreciated my picture choice and expressed gratitude and/or satisfaction to me for being so 'aware' of their problems. The picture was appreciated, as it depicted aspects of suffering inherent to the job and directly challenged the Italian media's representation of prison officers as brutal. The picture used in the PEI was often positively commented on by staff and produced a shift toward a more relaxing atmosphere throughout the interviews. The picture also allowed me to naturally introduce topics

Figure 1. An assaulted prison officer. Source:
© Luigi Gariglio.

concerning the use of force—the issue *I* was otherwise unable to introduce. Unfortunately, there is no space here to discuss the ethical and emotional considerations that all of this brings to the fore. Figure 1 was taken immediately after a prisoner seriously assaulted a prison officer. The officer told me that the prisoner acted 'without reason and unpredictably'. That assault caused permanent damage to his physical health. Piero, an officer, made the following comment about this photograph:

> Ok, here there is a colleague that is holding an ice pack on his face, right? On that particular occasion, he was punched by a prisoner and. … The prisoner probably was a bit agitated and should have been blocked before. Anyway … afterwards the colleagues will be cured; at least in this situation ice has been used. If the damage was serious, the colleague went to the first aid in the outside hospital to be properly visited and cured. Anyway. This is part of our job. It happens frequently that we are punched [in the psychiatric hospital] and anyway. Afterwards, we just keep on going and anyway, business as usual.

I interrupted him asking whether it was normal for an officer to be assaulted. He responded that 'well, normally … [prisoners'] violence occurs over there as well [referring implicitly to the contiguous prison], but here in OPG [the psychiatric forensic hospital] there is a much higher rate of aggression against us than in prison'.

Many interviewees constructed similar narratives during the PEI on this particular image by normalising the prisoners' violence while constructing prison officers as victims by denying their responsibility. However, while engaging in this dialogue, all of the officers knew that I was aware that things were more complex.

Much more complex and critical versions emerged from the same photograph (Figure 1) as well. Francesco, an experienced officer, sarcastically and clearly commented on the photograph. He talked about his violent use of force, in ways that were similar to Kauffman's (1988) research on four US

custodial facilities, referring to his 'bad' prison officers' short induction course. He challenged how he was taught to become a prison officer and the ways in which the wing had been previously managed; however, he decided to be ambiguous. Simultaneously, he considered himself unaccountable for his [wrong]doing by denying his responsibility in various ways (Cohen, 2001).

> That ice on [his] face … ah ah … is pure theatre. … The use of force is a routine here … but there is something I have never understood. I have never understood why prison officers are asked [by psychiatrists] to intervene whenever a patient starts acting out. We [prison officers] are prepared and instructed to do something else. A long time ago I did a course on becoming a prison officer, a very short one, lasting only three months. In those few months the only thing they taught me properly was to defend myself and beat others in combat with no pity. Ok? My teacher told us that the best form of self-defence was to attack, then (laughing). … [W]hy should they [psychiatrists, doctors and nurses] call me [to help them] whenever a madman goes berserk? I intervene to procure pain [on those occasions] and not to cure the patient. I am not interested whether he is forced to gasp for air, bang his head [against the wall or the bars], or whatever. … From my point of view, though, I just try to take him by the neck; in fact, I try to decelerate his breath, but I do not know what I should do. I simply learned by doing that whenever I take him by his neck he stops resisting.

Rereading the quote above elicited strong feelings within me; yet these feelings were not as strong when I listened to the statement during the PEI. This may be because the fieldwork was so overwhelming that I was somehow anaesthetised. How can he and others like him think in this way without showing responsibility or regret? Were they all anaesthetised as well? To what extent was masculinity playing a role here (Sabo et al., 2001)?

A woman prison officer working in the prison discussed this issue in a different manner; she talked about officers' aggressions in the nearby prison. She talked both about her experience and that of her brother, who was also working as an officer in the same prison on a male wing. She openly denounced the normality of her male colleagues' macho attitude both towards prisoners and female colleagues. She also highlighted that she felt treated as 'unable for action' by her male colleagues—in practice, a less-eligible prison officer. However, she described her version of violence inside, and racism, a real issue, emerged slightly. She stated that officers, not prisoners, were the real victims, and directly addressed managerial responsibility in this situation, shifting the officers' responsibility to someone else, similar to Francesco. She said:

> For us, being punched is normal, especially in a forensic hospital. They [prisoners] are crazy over there. It can be understood. They are simply out of their minds. The problem is that this happens regularly in prison, too. They do not punch that often, though. Their weapons are razor blades [instead]. They all have one; especially the Moroccans. … The problem here is our director. He doesn't care at all about what is happening on the wings. He never does anything about it, he just turns a blind eye to any problem occurring inside and minds his own business. … He only did intervene once, when an inmate threatened him directly with a razor blade on the wing. … The problem is that here they [prisoners] do not know what a punishment is … they can do whatever they want and nothing happens. I think he is on their side. But we have to work here and we must cope with it and just try to go on.

Other officers reflected on the same image and reported that not all officers had been assault victims, which implied that there could also be personal individual responsibility on the officers' side.

Another officer had been particularly dismissive about several of his colleagues' work performance, which others had already criticised. He anonymously described them as violent men with alcoholism

and depression problems. He added, 'You can't imagine what it looked like here just a few years ago'. This last comment was discussed in depth in follow-up interviews and clarified the past. On that occasion, I also learned that officers do not receive psychological counselling and that they often hide their problems and managers turn a blind eye to them, because for any particular officer, declaring psychological issues could produce great problems and result in unemployment.

Another photograph (Figure 2) depicts a constraint bed in a seclusion room and was taken in the Netherlands for another project (Visser and Vroege, 2007), as a similar bed in Reggio Emilia was removed during the initial phases of the ethnography, before I was allowed to take pictures. This image played a crucial role in unpacking issues concerning the use of force as well. It was selected as a stimulus to address a specific type of force: physical constraint (see also Rhodes, 2004). Throughout my stay, the constraint beds were used only in extreme cases both to manage suicide risks—or after an officer's assault—and to help psychiatrists 'contain' prisoners who could not otherwise be managed. Several of the prisoners who asked to be interviewed presented a slightly different reason for the use of these beds. Most of the prisoners agreed that in extreme cases, the bed can prove useful and should be used; however, they all argued that the bed was mainly used for punishment purposes, and this view was confirmed by several uniformed and non-uniformed staff. In other words, prisoners considered physical coercion foremost as a means of order and control: a technology of power. In Foucault's terms (1980), this power was primarily (mis)used to subdue resistance, neutralise troublemakers, and threaten prisoners who misbehaved or contested officers' lawful and unlawful orders (cf. Sim 2008, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that the constraint bed was a difficult issue to discuss with the officers. The photograph of the constraint bed worked surprisingly well to prompt dialogue on this issue, though occasionally it did not suffice. For example, one officer, commenting on the image, stated: 'here [in the image] there is, I'd say, a constraint bed, something that we do not have any more over here. That's it'. He then moved on to the next image.

Another officer expressed what might be one version of a widely accepted truth among staff (not merely custodial staff). He stated:

Eh, eh, this is paradoxical. Here at the OPG they disposed of it; they took it away. But they are using it in the hospital just around the corner. I know it just because Giorgio [a doctor known by both the officer and me], who often does night shifts there, told me. I don't know why, honestly speaking. I talk from my standpoint [being an officer] and from my ignorance and I cannot judge why they did it; yet, I think that taking that bed away was unreasonable! Whenever a subject shows psychiatric problems and becomes too aggressive towards himself

Figure 2. A constraint bed. Source:
© Luigi Gariglio.

or others, and all kinds of communication and techniques become impossible, then the only proper solution to get rid of the problem is to tie him to a constraint bed. It's as simple as that. Everybody knows it here. We have always done like that before.

Another experienced officer gave a lecture on how prisoners were once tied up with needles and threads and secured by padlocks. He compared old practices with new ones that had been adopted with contemporary 'user-friendly' constraint beds. He detailed the techniques, materials, and the different types of pain that people suffered in the diverse forms of constraints that were practiced in the old days. Afterwards, with a lower and more severe tone of voice, he talked in a quasi-confessional way, saying:

Well, I tell you, years ago, prisoners were tied to coercion beds very frequently. Before, only officers' *free will* governed the landing. It is horrible to say it, but many people were tied to a bed. … No reason was required to restrain a prisoner. A minimum reason … was sufficient to coerce an inmate and that coercion normally lasted for days and days; often until the bed was needed for someone else. It is as simple as that. When you were admitted into an OPG you were tied to a bed. … For doing nothing: tied to a bed! The bad thing is that, you see, we always talk about prison [even when talking about forensic hospitals]. I think it is important to distinguish. In the OPG there are no criminals. Criminals are kept in prison. These are people who stood up in the morning and lost their head. I think that there might exist a madperson in my family. Who has no madperson in the family?

As shown in the above quotes, very rich narratives emerged. Through the PEI approach, the ice was broken and a dialogue on the use of force was made possible: a dialogue in which the officers discussed their personal experiences, stories, and judgments. Of course, I am not arguing that PEI is the only method to address 'inconvenient truths' (Sim, 2008: 187) in a difficult field. Instead, I argue that this approach, in this specific setting, made a difference. It permitted the research and helped unpack several crucial issues on using force directly from participants. In this research, PEI was exploratory and was used as an 'ice-breaker' prior to the semi-structured qualitative interviews on the use of force after a year of 'traditional' (non-visual) fieldwork. However, PEI can also be a self-sufficient approach (Collier and Collier, 1967; Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011).

Challenging visuality through discussant interpretations

Visuality is a widely used concept in the field of 'visual culture' (Mirzoeff, 2011; Rose, 2011; Sturken and Cartwright, 2009).[1] It incorporates some of the well-known Foucauldian ideas of visibility, invisibility, and the normalising gaze (Foucault, 1975; Tagg, 1988, 2009), as well as the 'practice of looking' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009), the effects of prison architecture and design (Jewkes and Johnston, 2013), and systems of surveillance (Foucault, 1975).

A visual culture scholar has recently argued that photo-elicitation has not been consistently used to study visuality as of yet (Rose, 2014). This section is a first attempt to unpack the multilayered dimensions of visuality elicited through PEI within a custodial setting. In order to do so, a kind of working definition has been adopted. A few dimensions of visuality have been highlighted using sensitising questions in order to help the researcher interpreting participants' PEI transcripts. First, is a particular photograph interpreted as a hegemonic representation or as a counter-hegemonic one by the interviewee? Then, what is shown and what is hidden by the picture? Next, does the interviewee provide any further details and/or explanation as to why something cannot be seen in the picture? Lastly, to what extent, if at all, has the image affected the interviewee?

Reading the PEI transcripts though these sensitising questions helped to reveal several dimensions of visuality embedded both in the custodial complex and in reference to its representations, such as the discussion about the road sign (see below). Uses of PEI methods as strong means for studying visuality clearly emerged in this study.

Starting with a prison officer named Marco, not considering his descriptive reading of Figure 3, I now present his quote:

> Wow, everything looks so nice and clean there [indicating the image]. You did a good job, Luigi! Finally, someone has done an honest photo of this hell. It is really nice. It seems a much better place than it actually is. How were you able to do it?

In my view, this quote shows that Marco was both dismissive of negative Italian press coverage of the prison (an issue often openly discussed among officers in my presence) and, concurrently,

Figure 3. A view on the wing.
Source: © Luigi Gariglio.

that he highly appreciated my (unintended) 'docile' and 'misleading' hegemonic representation. Indeed, my interpretation of his words on the photograph showed (and constructed) a nice, tidy, and quiet place to represent a wing that he and his colleagues often defined as 'horrible, stinking, and fucking noisy' (field note), where the 'bulls were locked in the cages' (field note) one next to the other. This response to Figure 3 appears to demonstrate Marco's negative view of this particular wing through the lens of visuality. That same quote could also be interpreted as a comment on the connotation that was introduced by the photographer and could also be relevant in the previous section. Marco's quote demonstrates that Figure 3 presented the wing to spectators in a particular way: it constructed the reality it represented. PEIs serve as an interesting tool because after reading Marco's comments and looking at the image, readers (like you) can use the same image to attempt to make sense of his words and *vice versa*. However, this is far from unproblematic because viewers make meaning; they are not passive observers (Carrabine, 2008). Thus, any reader observing a photograph will add his or her own interpretation, which will exist at the intersection of his or her interpretation, the author's preferred meaning (Hall, 1997), and the PEI context. However, I suggest that having both the image and the narration helped me, an ethnographer who knew the setting, to compare Marco's opinions with the picture and his colleagues' opinions. I wonder, however, what do Marco's words refer to? To the image? The wing? How much are his words biased by his emotional ties to the officer in the picture? And how much did my presence influence his comments? First, as in all interviews, comments are *produced by* the PEI. Otherwise, the transcripts would not exist at all; they are the product of that interaction. Thus, I attempt to avoid a naive approach to visual methods by being aware of the researcher's influence (Gobo, 2008). Given the visual method, the qualitative methodological literature, and my personal field experience, PEI, among a variety of

Figure 4. Road signs (detail). Source:
© Luigi Gariglio.

approaches, can minimise the researcher's influence. However, the researcher's influence can only partially be controlled because it is a structural component of the situation.

Other aspects of visuality will now be illustrated in a few short quotes from dialogues elicited by one particular image (Figure 4) during the PEI study. The image used depicts one road sign to the prison (Casa Circondariale CC) and another sign to the forensic psychiatric hospital nearby (Ospedale Psichiatico Giudiziario OPG).

Several of the interviewees presented different layers of interpretation. However, I now only briefly focus on quotes that refer to two crucial dimensions embedded in the notion of visuality: the importance of the practice of making photographs in accordance with a photograph's meaning (Sekula, 1982; Tagg, 1988) and the visibility and invisibility embedded in the referent of the image as such (the road signs and the architecture). First, two officers challenged how the image was constructed by the photographer, viewing the photograph as a severe depiction by the photographer, who used a dark imagery to express his negative views of the 'dark and dirty prison' (Mario). Thus, they argued about the photographer's role in constructing that particular interpretation of reality. In these interpretations, aspects of darkness served as another layer of meaning; a judgment of badness, juxtaposed against the 'content' shown by the picture: the road sign. Second, several respondents questioned the politics of the road sign (not only its image), i.e. its construction and embedded power-knowledge features. Indeed, several officers and a number of other staff members challenged aspects of visibility and invisibility embedded in these 'transparent' road signs. One prison officer, while observing this image, began to laugh and exclaimed

'ah ah, a hospital?' (referring to the road sign with the red cross and blue background depicted in the photograph that is always used for any normal hospital road sign in Italy). He continued, 'I don't know why they have to mask the reality. … You know it well now. … After all these times you are here … is it a hospital for you?' I did not answer. 'It's a prison!' he said and stopped talking. In another PEI, one doctor, while observing the image, told me that he felt ashamed any time the sign reminded him that the facility was a hospital. Finally, a psychiatrist told me that he knew that I was using the image to highlight the incongruence between the road sign and reality. Many were dismissive of the 'hospital' sign, saying that the forensic psychiatric hospital is all but a hospital. It is difficult not to agree with them.

Conclusion

This research note is intended to challenge prison ethnographers to adopt 'a new methodological orientation towards the visual' by integrating photo-elicitation into traditional ethnographic tools during the interview process. Photo-elicitation allows the researcher to use images to inspire dialogue, thereby affording respondents more freedom to construct their narrations than is possible in standard semi-structured research interviews. By becoming the 'experts' (on what was represented in the pictures), officers offered multi-layered interpretations and descriptions on the images. PEI methods serve as invaluable tools not only for unpacking relevant factors, personal experiences, and stories from prison officer standpoints on the use force, but also for inspiring and then facilitating dialogue between researchers and interviewees. PEI methods served as 'can-openers' or 'ice breakers' in this particular field. This study is intended to serve an example of a possible pathway for the use of photo-elicitation, and much more methodological and substantive research must focus on the pros and cons of applying this tool within custodial institutions. In conclusion, this paper attempts to motivate researchers to use photographs during interviews to unpack the complexities of custodial worlds by

Note

1.	A previous version of this section was published in Gariglio (2015b).

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