Co-creating prisons knowledge inspired by collective autoethnography

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This is a story, a kind of map, about a study we co-produced on prison peer support work.[1] The social science community call these mapping stories methodology papers. We have tried to write this one in an informal (less academic) style to appeal to a broad audience — including people who live or have lived in prisons and who may not have had access to further education. 'We', the authors, are four people interested in prisons. Two of us became interested having lived parts of our lives in prison, two of us became interested by studying prisons at university. We met as part of a co-authorship project, which was originally made up of five former prisoner researchers and three academic researchers.[2] Having published our original study in 2023, we decided to write about our pioneering work together. (All eight original co-authors were invited to co-write this methodology paper and four of the team decided to do so). We hope the method we introduce will be useful to those interested in capturing (often traumatic) lived experiences in a way that values and centres those most impacted, and that we address the concern that people with lived experience often only emerge in research as subjects, rather than authors.[3] (Note: many of the academic sources cited here can be expensive to read without access to a university library. For help with access, please email the lead author).

We introduce a co-writing approach inspired by 'collective autoethnography', which involves a group of people writing together about personal experiences. 'Autoethnography' involves reflection on life experiences, society, and published literature.[4][5] Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as a project that 'helps us understand [the world…] and that moves us to critical engagement, social action, and social change' (p.229).[6] The goal is not just to capture emotional experiences but develop a critical analysis of social phenomenon: 'a technique of *social* investigation conducted *through* the self.'[7] Collective (or collaborative) autoethnography involves sharing personal accounts to support deeper analysis.[8] Diverse writing partnerships matter because most research about marginalised people is done by those who are not marginalised.[9] Indeed, criminological research has been criticised for a tendency to invisibilise participants, replicating the very marginalisation researchers often seek to shine a spotlight on. A radical challenge to traditional research is to develop community-led research agendas,[10] which value local insight and wisdom. Prison scholarship has overwhelmingly centred the interpretations and agendas of academics living outside prisons. Perspectives that are often absent are those of prisoners and former prisoners, yet experience of incarceration can 'add context, and contour' to analysis, providing an 'essential thread in the tapestry of criminological inquiry [providing necessary] building

1. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., Harriott, P., Page, R., Bradley, K., Nash, M., & Wainwright, L. (2023). Prisoners on prisons: Experiences of peer-delivered suicide prevention work. *Incarceration, 4,* 1–21.
2. See footnote 1: Buck et al (2023).
3. Booth, M., & Harriott, P. (2021). Service users being used: Thoughts to the research community. In Masson, I., Baldwin, L., & Booth, N. (eds). *Critical reflections on women, family, crime and justice.* Policy Press.
4. Wakeman, S. (2014). Fieldwork, biography and emotion: Doing criminological autoethnography. *British Journal of Criminology, 54*(5), 705-721.
5. Gant, V., Cheatham, L., Di Vito, H., Offei, E., Williams, G., & Yatosenge, N. (2019). Social work through collaborative autoethnography. *Social Work Education, 38*(6), 707-720.
6. Ellis, C. (2009). Revision: *Autoethnographic reflections on life and work.* Left Coast Press.
7. See footnote 3: Wakeman, 2024, p.708.
8. See footnote 4: Gant et al., 2019.
9. Brown, L. A. and Strega, S. (2015). *Research as Resistance* (2nd ed). Canadian Scholars' Press.
10. Edwards, R., & Brannelly, T. (2017). Approaches to democratising qualitative research methods. *Qualitative Research, 17*(3), 271-277.

blocks to a science of criminology and criminal justice'.[11]

Lived experiences of imprisonment provide valuable 'data' for academic studies, but the person *with* stigmatised experiences is often peripheral and prisoners' truths are 'located at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge — subjugated, disqualified, or 'muted' altogether' (p.110).[12] However, a criminology that aims to democratise and diversify knowledge by injecting theory from the periphery is possible.[13] Gathering such 'local histories' can restore dignity and access invisible spaces.[14] One approach is to position 'participants' as co-investigators, to view the community experiencing the phenomena as the site where 'local knowledge' is discovered,[15] and viable solutions provided.[16] This article tells the story of how we worked together to uncover local knowledge of prison peer support work and make recommendations for practice.

Our work aligned with a 'knowledge equity' approach (p.406),[17] which emphasises co-created knowledge and the importance of learning together. Co-creating knowledge involves an exchange of expertise and resources — for example, knowledge of surviving imprisonment and formally studying imprisonment.[18] In advocating knowledge equity, Jaffe argues that social inequities are made possible by knowledge inequity.[19] For example, when society prioritises discursive knowledge (developed through language and expressed in arguments and theories) above embedded expertise (the body's interaction with nature and objects), this creates a bias toward official knowers with credentials, and risks losing crucial knowledge and skills. As a result, Jaffe argues, we must dismantle the knowledge hierarchy and create learning through dialogue. Such action requires new modes of research, such as facilitating situated 'counternarratives'; knowing and taking seriously people's stories and enabling people to 'come into existence' (in this case as authors) where we previously only saw them as objects or 'others'.[20]

> Lived experiences of imprisonment provide valuable 'data' for academic studies, but the person with stigmatised experiences is often peripheral and prisoners'

Building our team

Paula is a prison reform activist and former prisoner who builds networks with prisoners, practitioners, and academics as part of her leadership role in a national prison reform charity. She argued that too little prisons literature represents the realities of people's experiences and advocated research methods that could uncover previously unexplored issues and solutions. Paula knew Gill and Philippa (university researchers) through her network and proposed an innovative research project, bringing together academics and people with lived experience to explore prison life. The project interested Gill and Philippa as they were researching prison regulation,[21] including how to integrate the experiences of prisoners into regulatory practices. Collaborative writing offered one way for people to participate in regulation, i.e., use their knowledge of prison to inform policymaking and academic knowledge. Gill and Philippa suggested using 'participatory action research' (PAR), which assumes that people impacted by a topic should be co-researchers.[22] Participatory epistemology (which means theory of knowledge) incorporates

11. Newbold, G., Ian Ross, J., Jones, R. S., Richards, S. C., & Lenza, M. (2014). Prison research from the inside: The role of convict autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(4), 439-448.
12. Ballinger, A. (2011). Feminist research, state power and executed Women: The case of Louise Calvert. In: Farrall, S., Sparks, R. & Maruna, S., (Eds.), *Escape routes: Contemporary perspectives on life after punishment.* Routledge.
13. Carrington, K., Dixon, B., Fonseca, D., Goyes, D. R., Liu, J., & Zysman, D. (2019). Criminologies of the global south: Critical reflections. *Critical Criminology, 27*(1), 163-189.
14. Carrington, K., & Hogg, R. (2017). Deconstructing criminology's origin stories. *Asian journal of criminology, 12*(3), 181-197.
15. Fals Borda, O. (1988). *Knowledge and people's power: Lessons with peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia.* New Horizons Press.
16. Peralta, K. J. (2017). Toward a deeper appreciation of participatory epistemology in community-based participatory research. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement, 6*(1), 4.
17. Jaffe, J. (2017). Knowledge equity is social justice: Engaging a practice theory perspective of knowledge for rural transformation: Knowledge equity is social justice. *Rural Sociology, 82*(3), 391-410.
18. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work, 53*(2), 1117-1141.
19. See footnote 16: Jaffe, 2017.
20. See footnote 16: Jaffe, 2017, p.406.
21. https://www.safesoc.co.uk/
22. Valenzuela, A. (Ed.) (2016). *Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth.* Teachers College Press.

'collective inquiry and socio-political action in the pursuit of knowledge that could… counter oppression'.[23]

In practical terms, Paula, Gill and Philippa (and an independent researcher who was part of the original study) met to plan the project. The idea was to hold focus groups with former prisoners (online due to the Covid 19 pandemic), serving prisoners could not be included because of the Prison Service research moratorium amidst the pandemic.[24] People would be invited to write retrospective reflections of being a peer supporter in prison and come together in monthly (online) group meetings to co-write an academic article. Gill and Philippa proposed the study to the university ethics committee to ensure that the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing of participants were considered. To acknowledge personal reflection and analysis as acts of labour, Gill and Philippa sought funding to pay co-researchers as employees for the period of data collection, analysis and co-authorship. Payment poses a challenge for planning research in partnership, however. Activities like planning research and writing funding bids (in many universities) are done by academics in their own time. Whilst this is problematic and has been raised by staff unions,[25] academics do at least have salaried jobs. If lived experience partners are unemployed (which is statistically more likely with a criminal record),[26] is it ethical to expect them to work for free on planning and funding research? Yet those not involved at these stages have less influence over the research design and management. This is an example of how experts by experience can be structurally excluded from influencing research agendas.

Once ethical approval was gained and funding secured, Paula recruited participants through the *Prisoner Policy Network* (PPN), including Rebecca, who co-wrote this article. Rebecca has a background of strategic development in criminal justice. She currently leads on extending support in prisons within a national charity and has an interest in bringing lived experience and academic knowledge together to inform a balanced collaborative approach. The PPN, hosted by the *Prison Reform Trust* voluntary organisation, is a network of serving and former prisoners and allies working to include prisoners' experiences in national policy development. Whilst we used this network to connect to former peer supporters, there are many people with lived experience undertaking a range of roles in criminal justice. Clinks found in 2019, 67 per cent of penal voluntary organisations in England and Wales regularly consulted service users in service design and delivery, 53 per cent relied on service users as volunteers, 29 per cent employed service users as staff and 12 per cent had recruited service users to their boards of trustees.[27]

For our original study, people could apply to work as co-researchers if they had previous experience of peer prison suicide prevention work. People on prison licence were excluded due to the pandemic research moratorium. Now that restrictions have lifted, there would be value in approaches like this involving serving prisoners. Because prison research most commonly informs us about men in prison,[28] we particularly welcomed interest from women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, who are over-represented in the criminal justice system but fare worse in education and employment.[29] Our original team was made up of five authors with lived experience of imprisonment (two White women, a dual heritage British/Asian woman, a Black man, and a White man) and three authors with academic knowledge of criminal justice (all of whom were White women).

Not every person who lives in or leaves prison will want to work as a co-researcher, not least because revealing a criminalised past can have negative consequences. To acknowledge this, we encouraged all

'Collective inquiry and socio-political action in the pursuit of knowledge that could… counter oppression'.

23. See footnote 15: Peralta, 2017, p.46.
24. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/946338/NRC_COVID-19_medium-term_plan_Updated.pdf
25. Leathwood, C., & Read, B. (2013). Research policy and academic performativity: Compliance, contestation and complicity. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(8), 1162-1174.
26. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunityemployer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders
27. https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/clinks_state-of-the-sector-2019_FINAL-WEB.pdf
28. Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2012). Digesting men? Ethnicity, gender and food: Perspectives from a 'prison ethnography'. *Theoretical Criminology, 16*(2), 141-156.
29. Harris, H. M., & Harding, D. J. (2019). Racial inequality in the transition to adulthood after prison. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 5*(1), 223-254.

co-authors to carefully consider whether they wanted to remain anonymous or not in publications. To inform decisions, we invited people to consider the 'hands-off our stories' principles,[30] which highlight risks of self-disclosure given that experiences may be appropriated to serve organisational interests:

❏ Participation is voluntary. You can always say no.
❏ Ask yourself, who profits from you telling your story?
❏ What purpose does personal story sharing serve?
❏ How do large organisations use stories to make material change?
❏ Storytelling as an exercise of labour/ work. Do you get paid?
❏ The internet lasts forever. Because of the technology available today, your interview or story will likely be accessible to the public for a very long time. That includes future employers and landlords.

All but one of our original team chose to be named on our first publication,[31] and all authors of this article chose to self-identify. Co-researchers valued the opportunity to be acknowledged, however, individual quotes and experiences within our write ups were anonymised. This offered some individual protection whilst allowing the person to still be named and acknowledged. People providing rich experiences were not made invisible, nor were experiences tainted with pain or distress tied to them by name.

Working together

Our first focus group in September 2020 was attended by all authors, via videoconferencing. Gill prompted discussion with an open question, asking how former prisoner authors *learned they could volunteer in peer suicide prevention and what motivated them to take part.* The rest of the meeting was 'unstructured', allowing co-authors to shape the direction. The discussion lasted 100-minutes and with the informed consent of the group, was audio-recorded and transcribed (typed up word for word). Both sound and word files were stored by Gill on a secure computer. After the first meeting, all authors were invited to write their (autoethnographic) reflections. One month later we discussed these together.

It is relevant to note that most group members were more comfortable *talking* about their experiences than *writing,* so the task of academic partners evolved into writing up some co-researchers' spoken reflections, others' written reflections and weaving in literature. For example, several people shared examples of working in highly distressing situations in prison, with very little or no support for themselves as peer support workers. Academic partners linked these experiences to writings on 'vicarious trauma' which is when exposure to others' trauma affects the wellbeing of the helper and changes their ability to engage empathically with those they are supporting.[32] This led us to consider the need for prisons and employing charities to recognise and minimise vicarious or secondary trauma. Facilitating some team members to speak and others to write is one way of broadening who takes part in research, but if outputs (e.g., reports, journal articles) are all written, this again privileges the academic partners. For this reason, our plan is to create other outputs such as podcasts and (prison) radio broadcasts, enabling team members who are more confident speaking than writing to lead on sharing findings.

> Trauma affects the wellbeing of the helper and changes their ability to engage empathically with those they are supporting.

Reflective (ethnographic) accounts can offer rich descriptions, exposing the chasms between prison ideologies and morbid realities, including the grinding, repetitive violence of prison.[33] Yet, trauma is relational, not limited to an individual's experience.[34] Indeed, we were all underprepared for how emotional the process of talking and writing together about past events would be. These reflections from our first group reveal this emotional impact:

30. Costa, L., Voronka, J., Landry, D., Reid, J., Mcfarlane, B., Reville, D., & Church, K. (2012). "Recovering our stories": *A small act of resistance. Studies in Social Justice, 6*(1), 85-101.
31. See footnote 1: Buck et al., 2023.
32. Bober, T., & Regehr, C. (2006). Strategies for reducing secondary or vicarious trauma: Do they work?. *Brief treatment and crisis intervention, 6*(1), 1.
33. See footnote 27: Earle and Phillips, 2012.
34. Bornstein, A. (2001). Ethnography and the politics of prisoners in Palestine-Israel. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 30*(5), 546-574.

Former prisoner co-researcher 1: I'm quite emotional talking now, but at the time, you just compartmentalised so much… [Seeing self-harm in prison as a peer support worker] would play on my mind when I was on my own, but it becomes the norm seeing that. When you talk to people outside of prison [they say] 'what do you mean people were slashing their face?' and I go, 'Yea! Sometimes the whole [young people's] wing did it', and they're just like, 'That's unbelievable!' That's just life inside those walls and that's why they do take advantage of us [as peer support workers]. And looking back on it, I realise now that I've been taken advantage of. At the time, I thought I was helping…

Former prisoner co-researcher 2: I've been out of prison 12 years and yet look at how emotional you can get when recounting something now when at the time you compartmentalised it. So, when I look back at jail, I don't even think I really cried. … I had this clear plan I'm going to survive this. … When I think back about prison now and the things I saw, like the girls cutting up… all the little micro and macro abuses… I feel so traumatised. … When I look now, wow, that was actually a lot to go through […silence]

Flotman notes that managing group discussions such as these requires 'a deep sense of personal self-awareness and self-regulation as [facilitators] serve as complex dynamic containers of group processes' (p.1).[35] 'Containing' relationships help people to articulate experiences and tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty through recognition and understanding.[36] This is important for facilitators of partnerships like ours to consider. Inviting reflection on traumatic experiences can cause emotional harm to speakers and listeners. We anticipated the potential for (re-) traumatisation and built in some safeguards, as we explained in our first group meeting:

Academic co-researcher: We didn't just [want to] drop you like you've been dropped in your prison experiences, so we've set up some [videoconference] meetings once a month for

at least the next three months. They're not compulsory, but while we're doing this writing… if you want to get back together as a group and say, 'Oh, it's been a nightmare since we last met', or 'Things are spilling over for me', or 'How are you all doing'? We're going to build a space for that to happen. So, you're very welcome to come and you're very welcome not to; it's up to you. And we've got a list of helplines for you as well, in case you want that outside of this.*

A (former prisoner) co-researcher noted:

I think that because [some of us] knew each other before we started working together as a group, I was able to be more vulnerable, yet immensely safe. So, safeguarding also links to relationships... I would advise people to spend time getting comfortable with each other before research begins and allocate enough time for this.

Researchers who were listening to, rather than drawing on, traumatic memories were also emotionally impacted. This led us to reflect on the benefit of 'containing' (reflective / cathartic) research spaces, or at a minimum, peer support spaces where difficult emotions can be explored and processed. Tolich and colleagues argue that researcher emotional safety is a key part of ethics and advocate for professional supervision for researchers.[37] Such formal, containing relationships allow people to reflect in a neutral setting. This is something we encourage lived experience-led/informed research teams to consider as an ethical safeguard.

Stumbling blocks

Our work together created meaningful connections, new learning, and the opportunity to share findings with peer support providers and the Justice Committee Inquiry into Mental Health in Prisons.[38] However, there were limits to our approach that may be useful to review for others interested in this method. Firstly, there were issues around our communication channels. As the global Covid-19 pandemic began, our group discussions were moved online to enable social distancing. We used the Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform, which

35. Flotman, A. P. (2018). Group relations consulting: voice notes from Robben Island. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 18*(1), 1-12.
36. Doyle, S. (2013). Reflexivity and the capacity to think. *Qualitative health research, 23*(2), 248-255.
37. Tolich, M., Tumilty, E., Choe, L., Hohmann-Marriott, B., & Fahey, N. (2020). Researcher emotional safety as ethics in practice: Why professional supervision should augment PhD candidates' academic supervision. *Handbook of research ethics and scientific integrity*, 589-602.
38. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/36300/html/

offered more cybersecurity than others similar applications.[39] This enabled people to get involved in research who may otherwise be limited by time, distance, or social barriers.[40] Whilst videoconferencing had the benefits of low costs and connecting participants across England (and has potential to foster international writing partnerships), it did impact the quality of interactions. For example, at times we could not see each other fully due to people working on mobile phone cameras, or the internet connectivity would dip, and sound would be affected, which meant that occasionally we missed parts of what was said. Relatedly, potential participants may not have volunteered because they lacked digital equipment, knowledge, or connectivity. Adeyemi and colleagues recommend that researchers partner with charities to facilitate the involvement of those facing financial or structural barriers.[41] They also propose that in-person contact be used in addition to videoconferencing to build trust and rapport.

Another major challenge in participatory research can be successfully sharing power. Too often 'partnerships' between academics and non-academics can result in tokenism or exploitation of marginalised parties.[42] We were keen to avoid these traps, but the academic partners did have control of funding and ethical approval given our base in universities. Indeed, it can be hard for service user/ lived experience groups to secure funding and ethical approval independently and this is another of the structural barriers to working as equals on producing knowledge.[43] Power imbalances can be mitigated with recognition of structural limits and reflexivity (open reflective discussions about power). To try and nurture more equal relationships, we involved several experts by experience to promote a feeling of representing a 'we' due to shared experiences and made clear that our aim was to draw on our varied *lived and learned expertise as equally valuable.*[44] One former prisoner co-author reflected:

> *In our group there wasn't a pecking order, it felt like a balanced equity vibe, however, I think it was still important for people to have the confidence and freedom to ask further exploratory questions. Peers related their experiences, seemingly making others feel more comfortable talking through a perhaps traumatic experience… the academics would then ask the open/digging questions to try and unwrap the experience. It felt like everybody brought something to the 'conversational table'.*

Another former prisoner co-author reflected:

> *I agree with the 'balanced equity vibe', but I would like to understand why some co-authors dropped out after they had given their spoken inputs. Did appetite for the article writing wane as we progressed through the long and difficult process of peer review (and rejection!)?*

Indeed, new obstacles were encountered during publication. The journal article that resulted from our work together was under review for two years. One journal requested a more critical stance to suicide prevention, which for a time directed our work away from its core message, but the revised work was rejected anyway. A second journal expressed concern we were too close to our subject and challenged the

> Another major challenge in participatory research can be successfully sharing power. Too often 'partnerships' between academics and non-academics can result in tokenism or exploitation of marginalised parties.

39. Azhar, M. A., Timms, J., & Tilley, B. (2021). Forensic Investigations of Google Meet and Microsoft Teams–Two Popular Conferencing Tools in the Pandemic. In *International Conference on Digital Forensics and Cyber Crime* (pp. 20-34). Springer.

40. Tuttas, C. A. (2015). Lessons learned using web conference technology for online focus group interviews. *Qualitative Health Research, 25*(1), 122-133.

41. Adeyemi, I., Sanders, C., Ong, B. N., Howells, K., Quinlivan, L., Gorman, L., & Cheraghi-Sohi, S. (2022). Challenges and adaptations to public involvement with marginalised groups during the COVID-19 pandemic: commentary with illustrative case studies in the context of patient safety research. *Research Involvement and Engagement, 8*(1), 13.

42. Sangill, C., Buus, N., Hybholt, L., & Berring, L. L. (2019). Service user's actual involvement in mental health research practices: A scoping review. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 28*(4), 798-815.

43. Voronka, J., Grant, J., Harris, D. W., Kennedy, A., & Komaroff, J. (2020). The possibilities and constraints of service user research collaborations: The Peer Qualitative Research Group. In *The Routledge Handbook of Service User Involvement in Human Services Research and Education* (pp. 446-453). Routledge.

44. See footnote 41, Sangill et al., 2019.

use of the self/lived experience in research. After strengthening our defence of autoethnography, the article was rejected again. Rejections are a part of publishing life, but they can be painful even for academics, who are more accustomed to them. For lived experience researchers less familiar with the process, they can be especially hard given critiques can hit personally as well as professionally. Peer review itself is imperfect, suffering from bias, a lack of transparency and training for reviewers, and long delays.[45] It is also a core part of the knowledge hierarchy,[46] which dismisses alternative (embodied) knowledges from those rarely visible as authors. We would add that the pool of reviewers — the gatekeepers of knowledge — rarely includes experts by experience. If we are to overcome tokenistic involvement of people with lived experience, one way is to include experts by experience on peer review boards. Former prisoners and prison staff could also be represented on boards deciding what research can take place in prisons, especially as 'the ability to reject or approve applications for conducting research with incarcerated populations, [shapes] carceral knowledge and… affect[s] the quality and richness of the data obtained' (p.183).[47] If local and national ethical review boards, research teams and publishing peer review spaces are all staffed by professionals who have never lived in prisons, our scientific knowledge is unlikely to fully represent lived experiences.

Positioning oneself as a researcher, writer (or indeed reviewer) whose capital is lived (marginalised) experience, involves taking on the dominant White-male, scientific voice at the top of criminology's long-established hierarchy of knowledge. Should people want to do this, it is useful to have 'communities of coping' where belonging is fostered, and people can 'offload'/resist experiences of marginalization.[48] Training and clarity about how people can contribute can also avoid tokenism. In future, we would build in a training period including basic research methods, writing skills, oral history skills and self-care. One of our

co-researchers suggested asking people in teams to explain what support they have for themselves while doing this work (rather than just offering support helplines), this enables members to share support strategies and ensures gaps in support can be filled. To improve retention, researchers could 'recce' people's skills and experiences in more detail at the outset; to best allocate specific activities and then ask members afterwards how it felt to be involved.

Conclusion

The criminal justice sector relies heavily on the knowledge and labour of criminalised people but less so in influential positions. Co-researcher roles create a progression route for experts by experience, but also illuminate where people with lived experience are often excluded (e.g., as grant holders, authors, ethical reviewers, peer reviewers), highlighting a need to diversify these spaces. Collective autoethnography, where criminalised people and academics write together about personal experiences could have much to offer criminology and criminal justice. The method centres those who are the focus of study, amplifying voices that are otherwise muted and enabling diverse parties to exchange expertise, and resources to drive social change. Writing personal accounts of stigmatised and traumatic histories can restore dignity, illuminate invisiblised places, and uncover solutions held by people with lived experience of criminal justice.

We were able to form a diverse team, based in different cities and facilitate varied ways of contributing, from group and one-to-one discussions to individual writings. We paid co-researchers for their time and enabled informed choices about authorship. We recognised the potential for re-traumatisation and built in 'containing' spaces for people to offload and discuss issues of power. This work took time, planning and revision but uncovered accounts of 'vicarious trauma' within prison peer support work that has been

> Writing personal accounts of stigmatised and traumatic histories can restore dignity, illuminate invisiblised places, and uncover solutions held by people with lived experience of criminal justice.

45.   Barroga, E. (2020). Innovative strategies for peer review. *Journal of Korean Medical Science, 35*(20).
46.   See footnote 16, Jaffe, 2017.
47.   Watson, T. M., & van der Meulen, E. (2019). Research in carceral contexts: Confronting access barriers and engaging former prisoners. *Qualitative Research, 19*(2), 182-198.
48.   Buck, G., Tomczak, P., & Quinn, K. (2022). This is how it feels: Activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector. *The British Journal of Criminology, 62*(4), 822-839.

overlooked in evaluations to date. We also highlighted possible harms to prisoner peer supporters and argued that peer supporters be included more strategically in plans to improve mental health in prisons. However, our approach was not perfect, and we encourage others to consider limitations faced.

Firstly, while the internet can facilitate diverse teams, it can also exclude people experiencing poverty or those in prisons who do not have access to devices and/or connectivity. It may be that for some studies, in-person writing teams are more appropriate. Secondly, whilst our team included different backgrounds, genders and ethnicities, many experiences were not represented. With careful adjustments and translation methods, this method could be adapted to include some of the most marginalised prisoner voices, for example, foreign national prisoners or those with (learning) disabilities. Thirdly, it can be difficult to meet as equals when some have experienced marginalisation and some privilege within criminal justice and research. These power relations must be named and worked through. It can help to explicitly state that lived and learned expertise are equally valuable and to include several experts by experience to increase confidence. Academics bring research knowledge, familiarity with funding and ethics, and their past achievements/reputations. They need discipline for study, time and commitment to the subject matter. Experts by experience bring community connections, knowledge of gaps in research and practice, and often a passion for change. In doing this work they need care for self and others, and bravery and strength to re-visit traumatic experiences. There are often higher costs for partners working through lived experience, as the work can impact their everyday life. A core message from our project has been the importance of valuing varied expertise within research. Existing ways of doing research can feel extractive to those being researched. The alternative we have presented here is one attempt to acknowledge and avoid this risk.

To cite this article: Buck, G., Page, R., Harriott, P., Tomczak, P. (2024) Co-creating prisons knowledge inspired by collective autoethnography. *Prison Service Journal,* Issue 272.