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# Doing 'judgemental rationality' in empirical research: the importance of depth-reflexivity when researching in prison

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**ABSTRACT**

Critical realist thought has theorised convincingly that ontological realism is constellationally embedded in epistemic relativism which in turn necessitates judgemental rationality. In social science, judgemental rationality involves acting upon plausible decisions about competing points of view. However, the tools for doing this are, as yet, under-articulated. This paper addresses this absence by articulating triangulation and depth-reflexivity as two tools for doing judgemental rationality in empirical research. It draws on the experiences of a diverse team working on an international comparative research project on conversion to Islam in prisons. It demonstrates how epistemic and relational gaps between researchers and research subjects can be bridged by mobilising the 'laminated' properties and personal attributes of a diverse research team that factors in attributes that are absent as well as those present. The biographical experiences of the team are analyzed in a variety of intersecting dimensions: faith, ethnicity/ethno-culture, gender, class and professionality.

## Introduction

### The 'Holy Trinity' of critical realism

At the core of original critical realism is the relationship in understanding reality of three-inter-related concepts of ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality (Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 2009).

Ontological realism asserts that phenomena exist both in the natural and social world independently (in the natural world) or relatively independently (in the social world) of what we know or think that we know about them.

Epistemological relativism asserts that the ways that we come to know existent phenomena are context-dependent, fallible and prone to individual bias and the vicissitudes of accidental properties of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc.

Judgemental rationality asserts the necessity of making judgements and decisions about competing or contested epistemic accounts of reality and of developing the tools and criteria to do so to arrive at plausible and accurate accounts of phenomena (Bhaskar 2009; Wilkinson 2015).

Judgemental rationality also asserts that there are criteria for explanatory accounts of social phenomena and that not all are equal with some more plausible than others. The realist is therefore required to adjudicate between competing accounts which do not over-emphasize ontological realism at the expense of the 'concept-dependence of the social world' (Archer et al. 2016, 4).

The dividing line between epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality is not always clear, it oscillates back and forth and can be difficult to anchor. In this paper we are emphasizing, in a research programme, how decisions have to be made about how to conduct ourselves epistemically. Our approach resonates with Bhaskar's call for meta-epistemic reflexivity and ethical, moral and political responsibility (Bhaskar 2009, 24–25) via triangulation which includes emotional responses to people and things, not just intellectual decisions.

This paper shows how judgemental rationality can be actualized in empirical research by triangulation and depth-reflexivity across a diverse research team. This paper aims to show how depth-reflexivity in laminated dimensions of faith, ethnicity, gender, class and professionality concretizes judgemental rationality and brings it to life in empirical research. By so doing, the paper aims to integrate existing knowledge about effective social science practice within the theoretical embrace of critical realism.

## An absence of making critical realism a concrete research paradigm

Critical realists acknowledge that the concept of judgemental rationality is under-developed and how to judge between different, better, worse and competing accounts of reality is fraught with complexities including the central problem of evaluative criteria (Bhaskar 1979; Isaksen 2016). Judgemental rationality is a critical and under-valued element of the critical realist project, because it represents the aspiration of critical realists not only to think clearly but also to act ethically. For Bhaskar, axial rationality (the reasons for acting) are the means by which one exercises judgemental rationality (Bhaskar 2009).

Whilst scholars, such as Danermark et al., have produced critical realist-informed methodology texts, the actualization of judgemental rationality or in Isaksen's words 'the greater explanatory power criterion' has been given less attention (Danermark et al. 2002; Isaksen 2016, 253).

In particular, we noted an empirical absence in understanding of what judgemental rationality looks like in a concrete, empirical context. We were keen to build on critical realist ideas of data collection 'process which involves adjusting our accounts, models and abstractions of objects and relations, so that various excesses in explanation are avoided' and the 'practical adequacy' (Sayer 1992, 2000) of our conceptual 'maps' is increased (Rutzou 2016a, 2016b). We posit that two important tools of this process are triangulation and depth reflexivity.

The current project drew upon the critical realist tradition but more specifically the emerging contribution made by Islamic Critical Realism (ICR) which applies the metaReal concepts of transcendence and recognition of the causal power of the spiritual dimension

to 'underlabour' both the social scientific study of contemporary Islam and the framing of Islamic praxis in multi-faith contexts (Wilkinson 2015, 2019). With this ICR framework, a key emphasis of this approach was to comprehend the lives of Muslim prisoners from multiple emergent, laminated dimensions (Bhaskar [1993] 2008) including an evaluation of their worldviews, religious practices and experiences of prison life. These emergent levels of being included the biological, psychological, educational, socio-cultural, socio-economic, moral/spiritual and geo-political (Irfan and Wilkinson 2020). This approach also emphasizes the notion of identifying **absence** and the impact of specific absences in the lives and experiences of Muslim prisoners (Wilkinson 2015). For two of our four researchers and for our research subjects, this Islamic critical realism provided a bridge-head between the academic study of Islam and the confessional practice of it.

Within the framework of our study our own properties, biographies and values would on this understanding inevitably affect the process of both gathering and analysing data and we conceived the awareness, articulation and constructive mobilization of these properties, biographies and values as a key element of providing the 'practical adequacy' of our conceptual 'maps' (Sayer 2000). The usefulness of this theoretical perspective was confirmed by our research. Moreover, as we will exemplify below, upon analysis and reflection of our research notes and observations we came to realize that our own experiences of positionality clustered into various multiple emergent, laminated dimensions of being (faith, ethnicity/ethno-culture, gender, class and professionality) that had intra-personal effects on us as individuals and inter-personal 'knock-on' effects with our research subjects.

The critical realist lens provided coherence for researchers with faith researching others with faith and provided a bridging language for including research on people without a faith. Social science, more broadly, has had many reductive approaches to religious communities wherein adherents have been reduced to ethno-racial communities and faith has been reduced to psychology (Spalek and Imtoual 2008). Both the dialectical and spiritual turn in critical realism allowed us not to reproduce such reductivism in a way which aligned with robust social scientific methods.

This article makes the case that awareness and articulation of the intra-personal effects and inter-personal 'knock-on' effects of a research team's positionality can greatly assist in building empathy and trust with research subjects, even in sensitive environments such as prisons, and on a controversial theme such as religious practice.

## Positionality, reflexivity, 'insider/outsider' and prison ethnographies

Existing critical realist notions of judgmental rationality and what Bhaskar calls 'enhanced reflexivity' (Bhaskar 2012) connect appropriately with a well-established body of methodological literature around reflexivity, including those that focus upon prison ethnography (Bosworth 1999; Liebling 1999; Crewe 2009; Earle and Phillips 2015; Jewkes 2011, 2014). These studies have sought to emphasize the role of emotion, reflexivity and positionality in qualitative research of prison. Some of this literature has drawn on international feminist criminological notions of voice, representation and caution about ignoring the exclusionary impact of power embedded in particular research methods (Pollack and Eldridge 2016). Indeed, the notion of positionality, power and voice was in part a reaction by feminist scholars to white male biases and the colonial assumptions

of early positivism (Jackson and Mazzei 2009). This critique prompted feminists to develop participatory methodologies in which researcher reflexivity and acknowledgement of one's biography and positionality is central to ethically informed research practices (Soni-Sinha 2008; Kilty, Felices-Luna, and Fabian 2014). Reflexivity has been defined by many ethnographers, but for our purposes a useful and succinct definition is to consider it as a 'turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' (Davies 2008, 7). This literature highlights the centrality of ethics in making good epistemic decisions and that in the practical circumstances of researching human beings 'is' cannot and should not be separated neatly from 'ought'.

## Insider-ness and outsider-ness: the privilege of partial perspective

Reflexivity in the research context has also been conceptualized as the awareness and mobilization of researchers' insider-ness and outsider-ness in relation to their research subjects and have tended to stress the opportunities in the generation of empathy and trust generated by an 'insider's' common ground with subjects of research (Nast 1994). These positions have drawn upon the theory that tries to debunk the myth of impartiality and posit instead the value of situated knowledge and 'privilege of partial perspective' (Haraway 1988).

Some scholars have attempted to bridge the supposed insider/outsider dichotomy by using a collaborative approach to knowledge production. Such an approach challenges the authenticity of the qualitative convention of 'giving voice to the marginalised' since this still retains the privileged status of the academic. The persons subject to being researched are actively encouraged to co-produce and co-author knowledge and outputs stemming from a project. Although this approach is not widespread, it has been applied successfully in prison research on women adopting a multi-vocal lens (Pollack and Eldridge 2016).

### *The problem of penal gazing*

Such an approach is reflective of a longstanding anxiety amongst scholars about the problem of gazing at another person's pain from a distance in prison research. The fundamental purpose of prison often goes unchallenged in a lot of studies on imprisonment; instead, the research runs the risk of academically informed penal spectatorship (Brown 2009). Some British scholars, whilst not strictly co-authoring with individual prisoners, have addressed these concerns by publishing detailed first-hand accounts and experiences of prisoners in their own voices (Crewe and Bennett 2012).

Similar anxiety has been asserted in relationship to reflexive accounts of Muslim researchers undertaking research on Muslim populations (Quraishi 2008). Hamdani termed this anxiety a 'Reflexivity of Discomfort' during their research on Muslim women in Canada (Hamdani 2009). Such discomfort stemmed from their reflection upon their status as an Arab Muslim woman affiliated to a Western University occupying 'multiple subjectivities' (Hamdani 2009, 380). Similarly, for Neila Miled and her colleagues their critical ethnography on Muslim students blurred the distinction between personal and academic parts of their life (Miled 2017). Miled was positioned as an insider Muslim but broke with some conventional ethnographic practices of

detachment. Instead, these researchers embraced active collaboration with oppressed groups amongst the Muslim pupils they encountered, many of whom were displaced from war-torn regions of the globe (Miled 2017). These attempts reflect interpretative claims that 'partial', situated insider perspectives are party to a privileged access to truth (Haraway 1988).

### The insider fallacy

Whilst prison ethnographies specifically focusing upon Muslim populations are few and far between the issue of racial discrimination and intersectional reflexive accounts has been more widely studied. Rod Earle and Coretta Phillips undertook ethnographic research in two men's prisons in South East England between 2006 and 2008. Their respective identities, Coretta a mixed-race woman and Rod a white middle-class man, provided for contrasting examples of how they were received and how they inter-acted with prisoners and staff. As a visible ethnic minority, Coretta was afforded a somewhat privileged access to ethnic minority prisoners, access which was generally denied to Rod (Earle and Phillips 2015). This situation established a problematic insider/outsider dichotomy reflective of the long-established challenge raised by social scientists resistant to the claim that only researchers sharing particular attributes (gender, race, language etc.) should research populations which align with those per-sonal identities or characteristics. However, Earle and Phillips prudently warn against the pitfalls of assuming universal insider black experiences or indeed a singular black identity and an assumed corresponding monopoly for ethnic minority researchers (Earle and Phillips 2015).

A further layer of consideration for prison ethnographers was provided by Sophie Gilliat-Ray and her experiences of researching British Muslim chaplains in prisons and hos-pitals (Gilliat-Ray 2010). Gilliat-Ray prompts researchers to be aware of the visible markers of difference and identity as inscribed on the body, particularly age, gender, and race. More importantly, she observed that most studies of Islam and Muslims in Britain erase the significance of their own bodies from their ethnographic accounts (Gilliat-Ray 2010).

What the literature on prison ethnography clearly indicates is the complexity of defining insider/outsider status. Scholars are keen to emphasize the fluidity of these categories coupled with the impossibility of objectivity in the ethnographic elements of a prison project. For Jewkes, the category of insider/outsider changed throughout the course of her fieldwork as they interacted with prisoners and staff alike (Jewkes 2014). Similarly, Malene Nielsen's study of officers and prisoners in a Danish open prison drew upon the sociology of emotionality located within debates about inter-sub-jectivity critical of the separation of 'objective' knowledge from 'subjective' experience (Nielsen 2010).

### Methodology

Our critical realist-inspired notions of doing judgmental rationality were set within a broader critical realist-inspired methodology. Our methodology drew on the critical realist idea of the primacy of ontology (Bhaskar 1979). The nature of the object of research determined our research methods and not vice versa. Religious change amongst Muslims

in prison, as a subject of research, exhibits both individual detail, intensity and depth, best captured through qualitative interviews and ethnographic-style observations, and national and international breadth, best captured into quantitative surveys. This mandated a mixed-methods approach.

Our methodology took the form of the following sequence:

(1)  Pilot Semi-Structured Interviews to test our theoretical framework and identify suitable quantitative variables.
(2)  Quantitative Attitudinal Surveys.
(3)  Full Semi-Structured Interviews coupled with
(4)  Observations of Friday Prayers and Islamic Studies classes.

## Ethics

The research project was subject to rigorous ethical evaluation prior to data collection. This comprised approval via the researcher's host university's ethics board to satisfy, **inter alia**, issues of informed consent, confidentiality, engaging with vulnerable respondents through sensitive questioning, data protection and risk-assessments for prison-based research in line with the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics for researchers.[1] In addition the project required detailed scrutiny, formal approval and security clearance for each member by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service National Research Committee for the English prisons. Similar approval was sought and granted for the respective Ministries in Switzerland and France.

## Recruitment

Having identified prisons in each country with significant Muslim populations, the specific institutional recruitment of participants was enabled through the research team spending intense induction periods of five research days in each establishment. Not only was the induction period part of the security requirement for the researchers but it helped foster relationships between the team and key personnel and prisoners in each institution. Prisoner respondents were recruited via a combination of publicizing the research via distributing leaflets and in-person invitations at congregational prayers, religious classes and various work, training or education-based activities in each site. Chaplaincy teams and prison managers were instrumental in further publicizing the research aims and encouraging prisoners and staff to participate.

## Analysis

Attitudinal Surveys were analysed using, as appropriate, basic descriptive statistics, including Frequencies, Correlations and Chi-Squares, Principal Component Factor Analysis and Linear Regressions.

Semi-Structured Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original languages (English, German or French). Each Semi-Structured Interview was first analysed with a

focus on the respondents' own narratives. Then the Semi-Structured Interviews were subjected to inductive, deductive and Axial Coding via NVivo. The qualitative data – interviews, observation protocols and field notes – was triangulated with the quantitative data. Observations of Friday Prayers and Islamic Studies classes were particularly useful for understanding the institutional level relationships between prisoners and prison chaplains. As well as, interviewing 158 prisoners, we triangulated our data by interviewing 19 prison chaplains, 41 prison officers and 15 prison governors (see Table 1). Therefore, our study exhibited triangulation of method and triangulation of actor.

### Basic contours of the research sample

### Prison categories and types

We researched in five English prisons, four Swiss prisons and one French prison in a variety of geographies, holding both sentenced and remand prisoners and covering all prison categories.[2] Our research sample included all four security categories used in England, and to ease comparison, we adapted the equivalent security categories for use in Switzerland and France.

## Who am I? A laminated model at 1M

Our critical realist development of tools of judgemental rationality in the form of triangulation and depth-reflexivity drew on a multi-dimensional ontology of human personhood. These dimensions would generate internal 'knock-on' effects with other dimensions and also make an impact on our research subjects.

   This model of multi-dimensional personhood that impacts both the ontology – the nature of the research subjects – and epistemology – methods of getting to know this ontology – was drawn from laminated models of personhood both within and outside criminology that theorize both the taxonomic and causal differentiation of different facets of human being and their relatedness in terms of 'knock-on' effects (Irfan and Wilkinson 2020; Smith 2010; Wilkinson 2015).

   For example, in a prison context, physical effects on the wings in terms of the heating of cells and the levels of background noise will have psychological effects in terms of prisoners' attitudes to programmes of work and education. Our multi-dimensional ontology, which was drawn out of observed effects of our interactions with our research subjects, included:

- age,
- gender,
- ethno-culture,
- faith and
- professional background.

   This simple laminated model of personhood existed at 1M – difference – in the schema of dialectical critical realism in that we were characterized by differences between ourselves as researchers in different dimensions and differences between our research subjects as prisoners, who had been found guilty and convicted of crimes.

**Table 1.** Overview of data collected in England, Switzerland and France February 2018 to March 2020.

| Country | Prisons | Security Category of the prison[a] | Surveys | Interviews with prisoners | Interview with chaplains | Interview with officers | Interview with governors | Observations: RE Classes + Friday Prayers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **England** | **5** | | **191** | **122** | **13** | **25** | **12** | **21** |
| | HMP Coquet | C | 57 | 33 | 2 | 8 | 4 | 5 |
| | HMP Forth | A | 24 | 19 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| | HMP Parrett | B | 52 | 36 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 5 |
| | HMP Stour | D | 19 | 12 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | HMP Severn | B | 39 | 22 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| **Switzerland** | **4** | | **54** | **25** | **5** | **12** | **1** | **10** |
| | Miteithlen | A | 20 | 14 | 1 | | | 2 |
| | Fontgrise | B | 15 | 5 | 2 | 11 | 1 | 5 |
| | Doriath | A | 11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| | La Citadelle | A | 8 | 5 | 1 | | | 1 |
| **France** | **1** | | **34** | **11** | **2** | **4** | **2** | **1** |
| | Hauterive | B | 34 | 11 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| **Total** | **10** | **4 × A; 4 × B 1× C;1 × D** | **279** | **158** | **19** | **41** | **15** | **32** |

[a]All prison names are pseudonyms.

## Dialectical critical realism

### Absence 2E

Another concept that was germane to our reflexive understanding of personhood was the dialectical critical realist idea of absence. In other words, differentiated and structured *being* is a co-presence of *presences* and *absences*. For example, in order for music to be differentiated from noise it is comprised of both sound and silence. Change is often the removal of absence as much as it is the alteration of presence. Similarly, slavery is both the abolition of something wrong, i.e. slavery and putting in something good, e.g. the universal right to liberty, freedom of conscience and the pursuit of happiness. Likewise, there were elements missing from each of our personhood which were obstacles to the generation of accurate, useful data since they generated suspicion or dislike. Just as there were presences in our personhood that facilitated trust and empathy with our research subjects, which lent itself to the generation of accurate, useful data.

There also existed absences of trust with the prisoners based upon differences in our accidental properties and the fact that researchers coming from outside prison are often suspected by prisoners of being government spies (Arshad 2016; Ross and Tewksbury 2018).

### 3L – Totality

Within our critical realist framework, we aimed to mobilize judgemental rationality in the form of enhanced depth-reflexivity as a tool for the removal of these absences and thereby the generation of transformative positive change in the form of trust in our relationships with prisoners.

The following accounts are necessarily personal since they articulate reflections of different aspects of researchers' laminated personhood and their effects on the outcome of the research.

## Who we are

### Muzammil

Is a 48-year-old British-born practising Muslim male of Pakistani Urdu-speaking ethnicity. He has been an academic in the field of criminology for over twenty years.

### Matthew

Is a 51-year-old, white, middle-class British male who is also a convert to Islam of 30 years standing. As well as an academic social scientist, he has been a mosque Imam and acts regularly as an expert witness in Islamic theology.

### Lamia

Is a 41-year-old, female, born Muslim, British Pakistani. She was born in Pakistan and migrated to England 21 years ago. She has been involved in research on British Muslim

prisoners since 2011 and have looked at their experiences prior to incarceration, during prison as well as post release.

## Mallory

Is a 47-year-old French-speaking white female middle-class Swiss citizen with a Catholic cultural background. She is a sociologist of religions working on Islam and Muslims in Europe for over 20 years.

## The dimension of faith: hugging and hand-shaking, greeting Muslims, and building trust

### The insider experience

Since we were researching faith, the fieldwork heightened our awareness of interactions based upon dimensions of faith, both shared and distinct and that this dimension of faith generated effects across a variety of facets of prison life. Muzammil and Matthew, as practising Muslims, were immediately conscious of their physical interaction and its importance in building trust (Gilliat-Ray 2010). This included hugging and shaking hands with Muslim chaplains and prisoners during congregational prayers or religious classes. Matthew was conscious that these routine and normalized ways of greetings raised some security considerations and were frequently witnessed by prison officers and managers. Muzammil often thought this would very clearly demarcate the researchers as with the prisoners rather than for the management or uniformed staff. Nevertheless, it was deemed essential for building rapport between the researchers and respondents. For Matthew, the fact that we came into physical contact by praying shoulder-to-shoulder with prisoners in the Friday Prayer showed an empathy and a lack of fear amongst the researchers which helped to generate trust.

Matthew was also conscious of the way their expressions of faith and its physical expressions broke down barriers to engagement – in a 'knock-on' way in the dimensions of class and ethno-culture – generated by him being white and middle-class. With all Muslim participants, Matthew endured the feeling of being more distant and initially less trusted than Muzammil, in that both for Muslim chaplains and prisoners, whiteness and middle-class-ness, are associated with non-Muslim prison authority. The fact that Matthew is an Arabic speaker and well-versed in Islamic theology were also factors through which Matthew believed were able to compensate for the 'white penalty'. Matthew felt that gaining the trust of prisoners was directly related to a number of additional inter-related factors. First, when explaining the background to the research, he emphasized a basic sympathy for Islam and its role in prison life. He also relayed the dynamics of his own conversion to Islam and referenced Islamic terms and phrases to both large congregations and when meeting prisoners one to one. The disclosure of Matthew's own sincere commitment to Islam was a touchstone to which prisoners could relate. It was clear at interview that this meant that they were happy to disclose their own journeys within and into Islam, including uncomfortable elements about their family backgrounds and trajectories into crime. This is also perhaps because they sensed, and sometimes Matthew explained, that there were times in an occasionally

mis-spent youth pre-Islam when he might have found himself on the wrong side of the law.

Once trust was established based on a commitment in the dimension of faith, it undoubtedly trumped the ethno-cultural and class-based obstacles to engagement. For example, in two cases, prisoners explained that they had initially been mistrustful of Matthew; but that verbal reports back to the Muslim prisoner-base at each Friday Prayer about the progress of research had eventually won them over. Here the act of regular and respectful communication with prisoners generated trust and a degree of transcendental solidarity (Bhaskar 2012) in a shared cause of wanting to generate a fair and accurate representation of the Muslim experience.

Also, as a white convert to Islam, Matthew was able to connect immediately and sometimes deeply with white converts in our interview sample. With one white convert, a former gang member (Chris), Matthew developed a particularly close bond, and he clearly felt that Matthew was someone to whom he could open-up even though the prisoner was, to some degree, the subject of fear for prison staff and other prisoners. He made a special effort to come and wish Matthew 'Goodbye' at the end of the period of fieldwork. This clearly illustrates that what for prison staff and some other prisoners was a source of suspicion – conversion to Islam – for Matthew and Chris was a source of connection that enabled them to transcend, in a research context, significant differences of class, criminality and education.

By the end of time in two prisons, the degree of faith-based engagement had developed to such a degree that, in one prison, Matthew became a co-teacher with the Imam at a Qur'an recitation class, and, in another, he delivered the Friday khutba (sermon) to round off our period of research. Thus, in both settings, Matthew consciously developed significant elements of the status of an 'insider' based on faith, which made procedures of gathering data smoother, safer and more effective. This journey by Matthew from prison-outsider to more of a prison-insider in HMP Coquet also had the effect of blurring the boundaries between participant and non-participant observation. This in turn meant that the presence of another research team member – Muzammil – during observations allowed the team to maximize the epistemic benefits of one of their number temporarily 'going native' and that together by triangulation they were enabled to view the sites of their observations simultaneously through both 'insider' and 'outsider' lenses.

### The outsider experience

By contrast, Mallory mobilized her *lack* of Islamic faith as a cultural Christian to suggest her impartiality to the experience of Muslims and the fact that she was not in a position to make any religious judgements about them. The fact that prisoners felt an absence for potential censure, for example, for not performing the regular prayer was also a platform for the building of rapport and trust.

Unlike Muzammil, Matthew and Lamia, Mallory did not share the faith of the prisoners. To them, as well as to the prison imam, Mallory was an outsider. Indeed, unlike Muzammil and Matthew, Mallory did not experience any physical or spiritual closeness during confessional activities such as religious classes or Friday prayers. Mallory's gender also contributed to this lack of intimacy with the male inmates. However, the disadvantage of

Mallory's outsider-ness as a non-Muslim also presented opportunities: her supposed ignorance of Islam meant she could ask some basic questions. Prisoners generally assumed that Mallory had no knowledge about Islam, and they took time to explain the basics to her. The respondents were keen to share some aspects of their faith with Mallory, such as why handshaking was prohibited or why Muslims fasted during Ramadan (and not another month)?

Mallory was always attentive to the ways that Muslim men approached to greet her; many of them explained why they did not shake her hand, what it meant to them to touch their heart with their right hand or what As-Salaam Alaikum (peace be upon you) meant and why they were saying it. Furthermore, when attending Friday prayers, Mallory always put a veil on her hair (most of the time the Imam had previously asked her to do so). Some of the prisoners thanked her for the gesture of respect while others told her it was unnecessary since she was not Muslim. Such interactions gave Mallory occasions to converse with prisoners and get interesting information about the ways that they were dealing with confessional and gender differences.

Her experience gave expression to the insider fallacy (Earle and Phillips 2015) that it is only possible for researchers who share features of the personhood of their research subjects to gather reliable data. For example, Mallory documented how a female Muslim prisoner used dance as a spiritual exercise which she might not have disclosed to another practising Muslim. This formed another piece of creating an accurate and broad jigsaw puzzle of being a Muslim woman in prison. When we came to analyse this data our different faith-based positionalities became a point of contention. Mallory felt that dancing could be incorporated as part of chaplaincy for female Muslim prisoners. Whereas Matthew and Muzammil felt that to incorporate this as Islamic practise would both undermine its personal quality and spontaneity and most likely would be resisted by prison chaplains. This discussion became itself an act of JR in how best to interpret and suggest action upon an interesting piece of data.

Mallory's outsider-ness as a non-Muslim, regarding prisoners and the Muslim chaplains, was turned into an insider-ness with most security officers, managers and the managing chaplains. They too were curious and did not always understand why a non-Muslim female researcher would be interested in Muslim inmates. However, the fact that Mallory was not Muslim was regarded as proof of 'objectivity'. They seemed reassured that Mallory was not there to judge their professional practices but to help understand Islamic practices, beliefs and worldviews in the prison context.

Therefore, in the research situation awareness of an absence of insider status with research subjects as well as the presence of it can facilitate the generation of friendly, productive and data-rich relationships.

## The dimension of gender

The awareness of the effects in the dimension of faith had knock-on effects in the dimension of gender. Religious greetings and interaction were significantly gendered interactions. When meeting Muslim women, such as a female hijab-wearing officer, or female Muslim Chaplain, Islamic cultural etiquette dictated clear boundaries about how Muzammil and Matthew were expected to greet or interact with them. However, this is an area of significant blurriness, a series of often unspoken assumptions, drawing upon

prior experience and 'testing the waters' to see whether the person is comfortable with shaking hands, being in a room alone with a relative stranger or discussing traditionally taboo subjects. For example, in a category B prison the female Pakistani Muslim chaplain was keen for Muzammil to accompany them around the female section of the prison visiting the health care cells for statutory duties.

The female Muslim Chaplain explained that women prisoners would often soil clothes or throw excrement or blood-soaked tampons out of their cells by way of protest. Muzammil could see bloodstains and markings around some doors and on the floor. One of the women was protesting by refusing to wear clothes, remaining nude and confronting officers unclothed. Such issues of menstruation and nudity are considered taboo in Pakistani culture (Ali et al. 2006). Therefore, this action signalled the female Muslim Chaplain's acceptance and wish for the researchers to experience their very challenging world.

Like Muzammil and Matthew, Lamia's shared religion allowed her to build familiarity and rapport with the Muslim chaplains and the Muslim prisoners quite quickly. The women prisoners had a close relationship with one of the female Muslim chaplains, and their support of our research played an important role in convincing the women to participate in the study. The women's Islamic studies class in prison was similar to Islamic studies groups for women that Lamia had attended outside prison. The social elements of hugging, chatting, sharing food and personal stories were an important element of the gathering; and joining in the prayers and classes helped to break the ice with the small congregation.

In addition to a shared faith identity, Lamia also acknowledged the commonalities between herself and the female prisoners in terms of roles as mothers, living in London, or television programmes they may have watched or the love of chocolates. Lamia reflected that a shared characteristic such as religion does not necessarily confer 'insider' status; rather any research presents complex, shifting, and multi-layered dynamics with a wide array of encounters with different participants. For Lamia, a reflection on the clothes they wore during the fieldwork highlights the simplicity of assuming a common religion could lead to an uncomplicated insider status. Clothes can be an important signifier of identity in any research project and can lead to quick assumptions about insider or outsider positioning (Rowe 2014).

Part of Lamia's reflexivity at the intersection of gender and faith, was awareness that the way they dressed would lead to varying responses as there are multiple, competing opinions amongst Muslims about 'pious' fashion and 'authentic' Muslim dress. Lamia usually wore loose fitting clothes covering all of their body and also a scarf around their neck. Lamia decided not to cover their head. Wearing a hijab to fit in with the social expectations of some of the participants of the research seemed a form of deception, and Lamia did not feel comfortable altering her identity for the purposes of the research.

In retrospect, Lamia reflected that she made the right decision. Unsurprisingly the group of Muslim women prisoners was diverse in how they dressed, with two prisoners, both African Muslims, wearing a full abaya and hijab, while the rest of the women had varying styles, the most common being casual tracksuits or jeans and t-shirts. Like Lamia, all of them brought scarves for the Friday prayers. Lamia had interesting discussions around dress. One of the prisoners spoke about how they used to wear a hijab when they lived with their parents but had stopped when they moved out, and

another told Lamia they used to wear a hijab outside prison but had stopped wearing it inside as they felt it attracted racist hostility from some of the prisoners. In this case becoming conscious of the possible effects of gendered choices of clothing and the importance of appearance facilitated the possibility of frank discussion and the chance to get to know prisoners better in an informal way. The fact that care had gone into these choices also communicated a basic human respect of prison staff and prisoners.

## Insider/outsider and speaking my language: the dimension of ethno-culture

The interplay of insider/outsider-ness between researcher and researcher also operated in the dimension of ethno-culture and demanded reflexive attention as a way of doing judgmental rationality.

In the English high security prison, there was a close supervision unit for prisoners, three of whom were Muslim, who had either killed or seriously injured fellow prisoners or officers. The Imam actively encouraged Muzammil to accompany him to this unit to speak with a Pakistani prisoner who mainly spoke in Urdu. Both the Imam and officers in that unit used Muzammil as a conduit to check on the well-being of the prisoner expressing disappointment when our research period came to an end. Thus, on the basis of shared language and culture, Muzammil gained a significant 'in' to the lived experiences of prisoners that bridged the significant gap between the imprisoned and the free.

Similarly, Lamia's experience as a first-generation migrant to England was a strong point of connection with both prisoners and the chaplaincy team and conferred a degree of insider-ness upon her that helped facilitate trust. Lamia's schooling in a Convent school in Pakistan where she had participated in choirs and the nativity play became a topic of discussion on inter-faith religious practices with the chaplaincy team. The Catholic chaplain in the prison was from South India, and Lamia discussed his journey from Kerala to Spain and then England and their infrequent journeys back and forth to keep in touch with family. These sorts of discussions were common in Lamia's interviews as well as informal chats with the staff. Lamia's South Asian English accent inevitably led to questions about where she was born and her migration experience. This sparked conversations with both staff members and prisoners, who shared their own experiences of migration and living in different countries and how these different experiences had influenced their life and decisions. Like Muzammil, Lamia's South Asian identity was particularly important in building rapport with the three Muslim chaplains in the prison who were all South Asian, one of the female chaplains had grown up in the same city as Lamia and they built rapport through discussions of familiar streets and special food haunts they had visited. A couple of times the two Muslim chaplains would share a joke in Punjabi while sitting in the chaplaincy area, this set Lamia up as an insider with them in a multi-ethnic space. The male Muslim chaplain also jokingly told a visiting chaplain that Lamia was from his family.

In the last Friday prayers Lamia attended, one of the participants told her that a prisoner who was South Asian and had just arrived in the prison was being harassed by some of the other prisoners who were calling her 'Paki' and telling them to go home. This prisoner was a middle-aged Pakistani who did not speak any English. Lamia was able to

translate for the prisoner so that they could relate their experiences to the female Muslim chaplain who was Bangladeshi and did not speak Punjabi; therefore, in a limited temporary way Lamia became an active prison insider.

Thus, Lamia was, over time and with the gradual exposure of aspects of her biography and her personal attributes, enabled to garner a high degree of 'insider-ness'. This in turn allowed prisoners and prison chaplains to disclose their own biographies openly and often emotionally at interview with her.

## 'Trust me I'm an academic!': the dimension of professionality

We have seen how the elimination of academic jargon was an essential element of a meaningful and courteous engagement with prisoners. Another dimension of all our personhood that affected our experience of research in prison was more generally our status as professional academics. Clearly given that the education levels of our research participants were in line with the generally low level of prisoners' education this might have been a source of hostility, resentment and a range of other emotions. However, because we had spent time and reflected on how to build bridges, it often became a touchstone to a shared experience. Cognition of multiple professional and theoretical perspectives resonates with Bhaskar's advocacy for researchers to be 'bitheoretic-lingual' or 'multitheoretic-lingual' to enable judgemental rationality (Bhaskar 2009, 74, 82; Isaksen 2016, 253). Similarly, researchers can undertake *immanent critiques* in several disciplines or traditions to broaden *retroductive* generability and plausibility (Isaksen 2016, 248).

Muzammil's biographical history as a criminologist, with publications about Muslim populations and crime as well as on Islamophobia and racial discrimination, was something he drew upon by way of introduction to prisoners and staff. In one prison the prisoners specifically asked for copies of our publications for the prison library. On a subsequent visit Matthew and Muzammil obliged by providing copies of their books for the prison library as requested. This seemed a relatively straightforward way of both verifying their credentials in the eyes of our respondents and gifting resources to quite limited prison libraries.

During post-prayer meetings in the prison mosque the topic of conversation often included discrimination or theories about crime, and Muzammil found himself engaging with the prisoners about common debates within criminology. Indeed, a few prisoners had studied criminology, criminal justice or law at various levels and so were keen to discuss these with him. In one of the category B prisons two Pakistani Vulnerable Prisoners agreed to be interviewed for the project. In each of these cases, the interview was conducted in Urdu during which each prisoner claimed they had been sentenced harshly owing to their ethnicity and the political climate around sexual offences. Each prisoner specifically asked Muzammil to be an advocate for their grievances, something familiar to all prison researchers (Earle and Phillips 2015). Whilst relaying his researcher neutrality, Muzammil assured each prisoner that he would relay their concerns to the Muslim chaplain if they felt it would help. This example is one of many where the assumed role of an 'outsider' may be viewed as a positive for prisoners but is also a point of peril since what you can actively do for prisoners is both practically and ethically limited (Nielsen 2010).

As mentioned above, researchers have challenged whether a truly objective role in prison qualitative research can be achieved. Similarly, with regards to the indictment of 'penal gazing' (Brown 2009), we gained trust amongst participants by explaining that the motivation for the study was not to capture the suffering of prisoners voyeuristically. Rather, the team were motivated to identify necessary changes in those conditions and to assist rehabilitation.

## Complex decision-making when dealing with terrorist offenders

Matthew his role as a professional Expert Witness in Islamic Theology and his faith intersected strongly with his professionality. For some prisoners, especially Terrorist Act (TACT) offenders, reared on the Doctrines of Loyalty and Disavowal, the mere fact that Matthew was an active witness in the supposedly non-Muslim Criminal Justice System was, for some prisoners, evidence of the fact that he was not a real Muslim, in fact that he was even an infidel (kafir) and not to be trusted. This became manifest directly on two occasions. In May 2019, Matthew was explaining the purpose of the research before the Friday Prayer to 250 main prisoners in a Category B prison. He was five minutes into his talk when a voice from the front row piped up, 'How can you say that you do not work for the Government, when you wrote a report against me?'. It turned out that Matthew had been instructed as an expert witness in this person's trial and was tasked with explaining to the Court the meaning and ideological flavour of items of evidence related to the so-called Islamic State group. When Matthew explained to the congregation, amidst a furore and with the prisoner stomping around the Prayer Room, what the role of the expert witness is and his role is this particular case, some prisoners clearly took against our research. However, for others, this professional and faith-based experience was an affirmation of Matthew's credentials and they volunteered to participate in the research. After this experience, Matthew always checked on the registered list of TACT prisoners in each prison whether he had been involved in the case of anyone in the prison. In one case, Matthew had been instructed in a case, and this gave him the opportunity to explain to the prisoner in person that this research project had nothing to do with their case.

In another Category A prison, during the Friday Prayer, a prisoner called Matthew a kafir (unbeliever) for giving evidence in court. Matthew directly challenged them in front of the congregation by asking whether they were really saying that giving evidence in an impartial way as mandated by God in the Qur'an (4:135) was an act of *Kufr* (infidelity)? Matthew felt that this was necessary so that his false interpretation did not discredit our research in front of other participants. As in the previous prison, for some prisoners this faith-based professional profile was a source of mistrust; for others, especially those who distanced themselves from TACT offenders and known extremists on the wings, it was a source of authenticating Matthew and making our research seem attractive.

This ever-present intersectionality between professional life 'inside' and 'outside' prison also became an issue of judgemental rationality for Mallory. In one prison, a prisoner recognized Mallory from a TV show where she was invited to talk about radicalization. They said that when they saw her name on the flyers that she distributed in the wings, they decided to take the opportunity to meet her. They said that they liked the

way that she presented Islam and discussed issues relating to radicalization in the TV pro-gramme. In the same prison, some security officers in charge of escorting Mallory within the walls, and others who had been interviewed, had attended Mallory's academic classes the previous February.

Mallory found this an interesting experience; a couple of months previously, she had been the figure of authority, leading a class and challenging them, now the power relations had been reversed. Mallory then became the one who needed not only their col-laboration to move inside the wings, but also their voices, their stories as experts of their professional experiences. They were proud to show Mallory their work environment and invited her to have coffee breaks in their offices. Those informal moments were precious for gathering other types of narratives (such as conflict within the staff). Mallory's position as an expert also helped her to secure access to the whole prison sample since she had met governors on other professional occasions. Therefore, Mallory's professional profile compensated for her outsider status in other aspects for the Swiss prisons, particularly with regards to staff.

This illustrates how a researcher's life in the professional dimension is both a pull to some and a push to others and is never just a neutral attribute and, indeed, that no aspect of a researcher's biography and person is left behind at the prison gate.

Judgemental rationality involves deciding which, what and how to disclose facets of one's personal and professional life that may help or hinder the process of research and the quality of data, including working out how potentially alienating features of one's biography can be transformed from a barrier into an opportunity.

## The team dimension

There were two key elements that were critical to the successful engagement of 279 pris-oners with our research. Although we represented a diverse team in terms of our biogra-phies, we shared a common academic interest in understanding Islam and Muslims in contemporary societies. We could empathize with Muslims' desire to practise their faith and to understand facets of life through the prism of Worldviews formed by Islam. These commonalities ensured that the diversity amongst us did not fragment the team.

Second, as we have seen, by working as a team, aspects of our personhood, in Mat-thew's case white, upper middle-classness, were offset by working alongside a person, Muzammil, with the different visible characteristics of a second-generation British Asian. Conversely, Matthew's training and background as a former mosque Imam and expert witness in Islam served to credentialize Muzammil's faith. When we worked with Lamia in a prison with a female side, prisoners were able to unburden themselves to another Muslim woman in a way that they would have been much less comfortable to do to a man and Lamia was able to move around the prison in a way that was safer than it would have been for a lone female researcher.

The variety of our *visible* characteristics as a team lowered suspicion and enabled the gradual build-up on trust based on our *invisible* characteristics of trustworthiness, knowl-edge of the faith and basic human empathy. In short, working as a team meant that the deal with the prisoners stayed on the table long enough to become attractive and for us to gather data for our research. This enabled us to access both the trusting and more extroverted prisoners and those who were by nature more suspicious and needed

more time to engage. It also meant that, for both researchers and research subjects, interviews were often enjoyable experiences. Research subjects felt free to trust us with stories and views that had formed a precious part of their lives, including, for example, spiritual dreams which was therapeutic. The empathy felt by researchers meant that we understood that we had been given privileged access to a person, who despite imprisonment, was a valuable and important human being.

## Non-engagement

Nevertheless, there were prisoners who did not engage with us. The common reasons we noted for not participating were:

- apathy (can't be bothered, too busy);
- conversion to Islam was a strategic choice with no real interest in it;
- suspicion (you are spies);
- disagreement with the research (on the grounds that Muslims and non-Muslims should not live together);
- fear of extremist prisoners and
- disillusionment such as witnessing hypocritical or violent Muslims who dealt drugs.

This fact of the non-engagement of a proportion of prisoners, of course, raises further issues of judgemental rationality as to the reliability and generalizability of the data that one has gathered. In our case, we mitigated some of this disengagement by capturing some of the voices of the disengaged anecdotally and *en passant* and asking prisoners who did engage with us about the religious experiences of the disengaged at second-hand. This implies that judgemental rationality mandates epistemological flexibility in order for researchers to be responsive to unforeseen challenges in the field.

## Conclusion

Critical realism acknowledges that the world is structured and differentiated and prone to change (Bhaskar 1975, 2009), by doing judgemental rationality in social science we move closer to articulating the nature of reality in different empirical contexts in accurate and respectful ways (Sayer 2000).

For us, 'doing judgemental rationality' meant triangulating and engaging in depth-reflexivity as a team on multiple, 'laminated' levels of class, gender, ethnicity, faith and professionality. This process of enhanced reflexivity in multiple dimensions helped us generate a shared epistemic lens that brought us reliable and detailed data about the ontology of Islam in prison. This form of judgemental rationality helped us to remove mistrust and thereby generate the necessary conditions of transcendental identity for information and experiences of faith to flow between researcher and researched.

## Notes

1. https://www.britsoccrim.org/ethics/

2. For details of security categories see: https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/your-a-d-guide-on-prison-categories/

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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