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“This is My Story”: Why People in Prison Participate in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This study aims to understand why people agree to participate in qualitative research. While some studies have emphasized the motivation to participate in research, the nuances and underlying stories that favor participation have not yet been examined. Using data from repeated biographical open-ended interviews with men and women convicted of violent crimes in Argentina and Chile, we distinguish between stories emphasizing the interviews as a space or opportunity for a) healing and self-improvement, b) venting emotions, c) presenting alternative stories, and d) creating individual or systemic change. We also discuss stories that indicate a different direction, namely e) skepticism regarding research participation. The stories are discussed in view of self-presentations, the prison context, and issues of consent. Our study underscores the importance of critically exploring widespread narratives about the benefits of qualitative interviews. Understanding the stories that encourage or discourage participation in research allows for a more nuanced comprehension of the recruitment processes, consent to participate, and the qualitative interview dynamics.

Keywords

consent, interviews, narratives, participant motivations, prison, qualitative research, reflexivity, research participation

Introduction

Juan was born in Argentina and was 39 years old when we first met. He was serving time for the homicide of his next-door neighbor. During three interviews, we talked about everything—from his childhood and family to his intimate life and his passion for football. We wanted to know how he viewed his participation in our research project. Juan said: “So, when you talk to a good friend, someone who is really, really close, and you feel relieved after talking? I thought maybe this would be like that and I said ‘yeah, why not?’” In his view, the interviews were a space for venting emotions. Other participants expressed additional reasons for taking part in this research, and many combined several explanations for their consent.

The overall impression of most qualitative researchers is that people volunteer and enjoy the interview. Speaking from our experience, this is even more frequent in prison. People in prison may have several reasons for participating in qualitative research and equal reasons to be skeptical. Most feel fortified when talking about their lives, but others may feel shame, fear sanctions from authorities, and fear being seen as a snitch. A

snack and time to talk about oneself pale in comparison. Thus, we ask: What motivates incarcerated people to reminisce potentially painful experiences and stigmatized actions, discuss adverse events, and unveil detrimental parts of their past in research interviews?

As part of a study of people in prison in Latin America (CRIMLA)—guided by an aim to theorize and understand life stories and trajectories—we asked participants to elaborate on the experience of the research interview and process. The results confirm findings from previous studies, indicating that participants view participation as overall positive. However, they also bring some potential problems to the fore. We highlight participants’ stories about reasons to participate in interviews and use these *narratives of motivation* to discuss

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qualitative interviewing, particularly but not limited to, institutions like the prison. Results inform a discussion on the complexity and implications of consent to participate in qualitative research.

Reasons to Participate in Qualitative Research

Scores of studies suggest that people appreciate being part of interview research. Talking about adverse events has a cathartic benefit (Copes et al., 2012), including being acknowledged and feeling a sense of belonging (Beck, 2005), starting therapeutic healing processes after extreme traumatic experiences (Rosenthal, 2016), such as abuse (Snyder, 2016), assisting life transitions (Perry & Bigelow, 2020), and providing help with counseling (Cervantes et al., 2019). Another study examined how participants experience the interaction as neutral and non-judgmental (Bourne & Robson, 2014). While re-traumatization has been mentioned as a potential risk when interviewing vulnerable populations (Winfield, 2021), and the underlying ethics of these studies (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007), the more common themes include research participation as a way to decipher harsh experiences, feeling empowered, and finding a voice.

While participant's involvement in the production of academic knowledge has often been considered peripheral (Macran & Ross, 2002), studies addressing varied topics, ranging from pregnancy (Gatny & Axinn, 2011) to palliative care (Gysels et al., 2008), have demonstrated that knowing what motivates people to participate is an integral part of the research process. For instance, age can be important to understand willingness to participate in a study, and encouraging engagement, using open-ended questions, and avoiding adult-centric approaches when interviewing children have proven to be a successful strategy in promoting participation (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019).

The sociological research tradition is useful to analyze the ways people make sense of their actions (i.e., deciding to talk about their lives). Viewing the interviews as contextualized storytelling interactions, the associated self-presentations can be interpreted as negotiating meaning (Presser, 2005), avoiding stigmatizing identities (Henson & Olson, 2010), and managing multiple degrees of ambiguity (Poppi & Sandberg, 2021). The gratification of telling stories has been identified as an integral part of identity practices (Jackson-Jacobs, 2004), and the institutional context has been underscored as shaping motivations and interest in engaging with researchers (Liebling, 1999; Liem & Richardson, 2014).

Feminist and gender-centered perspectives have emphasized the relevance of identity and power dynamics in recruitment. Queer criminology (Panfil, 2021) and social studies (Schmitz et al., 2019) have stated that the involvement of LGTB + people in research is linked to their desire to enact social change and promote advocacy, but most notably, to seek visibility as queer population and set a specific agenda regarding their lives, such as promoting legal rights and

denouncing hate crimes. Furthermore, victims of intimate partner violence described healing and empowerment as an effect of sharing their experiences (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Dichter et al., 2022). Black women with incarceration history also described interviews as spaces for "truth telling," with potential to increase awareness about trauma in their communities (Gunn, 2021). Some people may be more prone to participating in research as part of a communication strategy or because they have particular experiences.

Research exploring the motivations of people in prison to participate in research is scattered and fragmented (Bosworth et al., 2005) and in Latin America almost non-existent. Furthermore, the literature is predominantly quantitative and focuses on violent trauma, neglecting the analysis of other experiences of the interviewees (Deuter & Jaworski, 2016). Nonetheless, preliminary research indicates that motivation to participate in research in prison include psychological satisfaction (Copes et al.), cooperation with the prison staff (Waldram, 1998), gaining advantage or tangible benefits (Mcdermott & King, 1988; Waldram, 1998), the social benefits of engaging with an outsider (Liebling, 1999; Mcdermott & King, 1988), seeking understanding and a "voice" (Bosworth et al., 2005), satisfying a desire for change and social reform (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2016), and altruism (Overholser, 1987). Moreover, people in prison report that being interviewed offers respite from the boredom of prison life and a break from routine (Copes et al., 2012). The sometimes unrealistic expectations about researchers' capacity to assist them, for instance in legal procedures, can be another driver (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2016).

The present study analyzes the motivations people sentenced for committing violent crimes had for participating in qualitative interviews. We examine the reasons for participating in research not only as motivations for participation, but also as stories in their own right, including reflections on where they come from and the narrative work (Frank, 2010) they do in interaction. We specifically discuss the stories that instigate, sustain, or restrain participation in qualitative research and explore their potential implications.

Methods

The study is based on 65 life stories with incarcerated cis-gender individuals from Argentina and Chile (40 men and 25 women). A quota sampling technique was employed, considering the challenges to conduct fieldwork in prison (i.e., accessing institutions, contacting interviewees) (Briggs, 2011). The sample comprised people convicted for homicide, femicide/feminicide, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse. Furthermore, 36% of the participants had finished primary school before the crime, 44% had graduated from high school, and 20% had a university degree. Approximately 48% were aged between 18 and 25 years when they committed the crime, 36% between 26 and 35 years, and 16% were aged

36 years or older. The average time spent in prison was 4.5 years.

Data collection took place at five sites belonging to penitentiary systems of both countries, including institutions of different administrative areas (federal or municipal) and security level (medium and maximum). Access to participants was gained with two strategies. In prisons with educational facilities (i.e., primary or secondary schools, university courses), the project was formally presented to the students and they were invited to participate. In other prisons, prison staff was informed about the nature of the study, and they asked people in each unit or living quarters if they wanted to participate. Participation was voluntary.

The interviews were conducted and analyzed in Spanish by the same researchers who recruited the sample. Open-ended life-story approach was adopted to guide the conversation, tackle emergent topics, and elaborate on meaningful themes (Rosenthal, 2018). Three interviews were conducted with each participant. We obtained information on how participants viewed the qualitative interviews at several points in the research process, including after they had had some time to reflect on their experiences. This implies that our findings cannot, at least directly, be extended to single interview research designs. It is possible that stories, especially regarding the interview as a place for self-improvement and venting, would be different in such studies.

All interviews began by asking the participants about their life. Probing included follow-up questions, paraphrasing statements, and interjections. The conversation followed the sequences brought up by the participants, and intrinsic questions—i.e., questions that arise from the topics addressed by the participant (Chaitin, 2004)—were usually asked in the third session. On average, the interviews lasted 100 minutes and were recorded digitally. Participants received no economic compensation for their participation, but they were offered snacks.

Complete transcripts were made of each interview and were given to the interviewees to read and make alterations. Participants were given the opportunity to comment, modify, rephrase, or delete the content of the interviews. Based on a collaborative research approach (Atkinson, 2012), we believe that sharing the transcripts and allowing participants to reshape the life stories encouraged their participation, provided them a chance to claim authorship of the stories, and improved reliability of the data (Rowlands, 2021). Overall, participants did not make substantial alternations to the transcripts, except for changing names of places and institutions, and in three cases replacing specific professions and dates, to ensure anonymity.

An important limitation of this study is that we do not have information on why people chose not to participate or withdrew from the study. Three prisoners who were asked to participate rejected, and two withdrew after the first interview: One moved to another facility and the other said she did not have time anymore (probably concealing the main reason for

withdrawal from the study). Thus, we mainly have the reasons for why people chose to participate and not why they did not. However, very few did not agree to participate and even fewer withdrew, strengthening our main finding that these interviews were seen as beneficial. Some participants also expressed skepticism that can be seen as related to non-participation. So even though our most solid data is on participation we believe that it speaks to non-participation as well.

Codes were created inductively following a thematic perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our study focused on the way participants' explained their participation in research or their reasons for participation. Since there might be motivation they did not express or unconscious motivations for participating as well, we prefer to describe these explanations as *stories* that facilitated participation. We organize the results in the main themes related to narratives which encouraged or discouraged participation. The quotes presented in this paper were translated into Spanish by the first author.

Ethical approval was provided by the IRB of the Gino Germani Research Institute (Argentina) and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Chile (Chile). Informed consents were obtained, both written and verbal, and data were kept confidential on hard drives and in an online secure platform. Pseudonyms were used to anonymize the participants.

Stories Facilitating Research Participation

Participation in research may have some a wide range of advantages. For example, participation could be means to gain new acquaintances, present oneself differently to prison authorities and other people in prison, escape the boredom of prison life briefly, or get access to snacks or money (Copes et al., 2012). Adrián (28) said:

To be honest, I accepted (to participate) because I was bored. No offence. This prison is a small place. Everyone talks. So, just spending time with you made them see me differently (...) Not just the teachers and guards, but other guys in my situation as well as some women (giggles). I might have used this situation to start some conversation.

Laughter, jokes, and other narrative devices (such as omitting harsh words or replacing them with softer terms) were sometimes used to buffer statements regarding these concrete interests to participate in research. These pragmatic reasons for participation might have been important for some, especially regarding recruitment to the first interview. They were not the most important ones however, according to our research participants. Instead they emphasized four main reasons for participation. In short, participants saw the interviews as a space for healing and self-improvement, venting emotions, presenting alternative stories, and an opportunity to fuel change.

Healing and Self-Improvement

The most prevalent narrative used by the interviewees to explain their participation was self-improvement. “Talking helps,” “knowing myself,” and “rethinking my own life helps to see and change” were some of the expressions used. Stories about personal transformation sustained their motivation and eagerness to talk about their past.

For Nicolás (29), the opportunity to revisit the most critical events that shaped his life meant the chance to continue and deepen a “healing process.”

I have agreed, I mean, I think that ultimately it is because this will help me in my process. I have been here for three years, and I understand that the only way out and not to bounce back here is to acknowledge what I have done and work with that (...) One step, or at least a recommendation, is to talk about your life and reflect upon all those things that marked us. This is part of the healing process.

The references to a change in Nicolás’ interview may be seen as institutional marks (McKendy, 2006), indicating a socialization process that starts in prisons, juvenile centers, and other meetings with people in authority (judges, social workers, psychologists). This type of talk links the participant to a broader formal context and is reflective of what the system expects, encourages, or imposes. Arguably, when participants embrace self-improvement narratives, they get closer to hegemonic discourses, most importantly by accepting the premise that they need to improve and that self-reflection is important.

Psychological satisfaction (Copes et al., 2012) and treating the interview to pursue a reflexive process was more common among individuals aligned with institutional discourses of self-reform. Additionally, these interviews were inseparable from the broader subjective process of desistance and subjective transformation (Cid & Martí, 2012; Liem & Richardson, 2014) and, consequently, with what Goffman (1961) describes as the mortification of the self. Sebastián (23) said:

I would like to keep something from this, so that it is not just for you, but for me as well. Seeing myself reflected, seeing myself like in a mirror. I would like to share this responsibility. Not just giving a testimony, but my life history. It could help me to understand certain things, to put it simply. Understand, reflect, see myself, get over things, because it is necessary to know oneself, to improve (...) One does not get to experience this every day. I took it this way, to search for a meaning, to feed back with my positive experiences and distance myself from the negative ones.

Mainstream treatment discourses imposed in penal institutions shape this narrative. Theories about trauma, upbringing, family dynamics, and identity formation, among others, imbued their stories (Di Marco, 2022). Sebastián, for

instance, stated that only by lending new meaning to his life events would he be able to accept responsibility for his past actions and “correct his life course.” Sometimes, the researcher was drawn in as an aide in the self-improvement process. Ricardo (23) saw the interviews as a resource and asked the interviewer about the “meaning of life.”

That is why I asked you today (about the interviews). I think you studied many things, and you know about life. So, you may be able to give an explanation to that. That is why I asked you if you found some meaning to life (...) I guess interviews like these can help other people in their (healing) processes, but it is also useful for me, to gain insight and learn stuff.

Asking for opinions, views, resources, and contacts was possibly a way to establish a relationship with the interviewer that eventually became integral to changing their life direction.

Self-improvement is thematized in different ways: as shaping a new reformed self (“I need to tell my story to start reshaping it”), as part of a therapeutic process (“this is part of the steps of the program”), encouraged by new religious or philosophical beliefs (“thinking and making amends about past sins is necessary to get inner relief”), as a necessary process to bond with relatives and friends (“I want to be able to process all of this to go back to my wife”). Regardless of the specificities of each case, these themes converge into a similar institutional goal of redemption and cooperation (Waldram, 1998).

Self-improvement narratives were often presented as part of a new self (Presser, 2008), but participants were still conscious and reflexive in terms of the institutional setting of the interviews and critical of what they thought researchers “want to hear.” David (29) said self-improvement was important for him, and that it also allowed him to talk to specific people in the prison:

I know that many of these guys will tell you that they agree (to do the interview), because it is good for them. And I know that a lot of it is crap. They are just tricking you (boludeándote) because they know that is what you want to hear, and the staff wants to hear it too. But for some of us, it is truly a positive thing.

As illustrated by David’s quote, self-improvement is not necessarily a hegemonic “taken-for-granted” discourse (Zerubavel, 2018), but is interpreted, reflected on, contested, and shaped by those who participate in research. Acknowledging that people in prison may use “system” discourses strategically, many still emphasized that this was not the case with these qualitative interviews.

Self-improvement featured as the recurrent reason for participants to describe their willingness to participate; personal growth and change were the core elements of this motivation. Despite the different forms of self-improvement addressed (religious, social, relational, personal), they were

connected by a similar discourse of subjective transformation or redemption (Jarman, 2019; Mcadams et al., 2001; Stone, 2016). While participants could be critical of the instrumental use of such narratives in meetings with the prison system, they still regarded healing and self-improvement an important reason for their participation.

Emotional Outlet

Self-improvement could be associated with, or specified as, interviews serving as a vent. This emotional outlet could be part of subjective transformation; however, venting could also be seen as helpful in its own right. Participants had an emotional drive to talk about their lives and current circumstances, and the interview offered them a space to do so. This venting (*desahogarse*) was referenced in diverse ways by participants. For example, Cintia (29) said it helped her connect past events.

It is hard to talk about this, that is why I do not do it so often (weeps)(...) I do not know. It feels good to go back to my own history and tie together events, people. Perhaps, sometimes I need to open up and vent, get it all out. It may be healthy.

Self-narration, reflexivity, and biographization are distinctive features of modernity and Western subjectivity (Giddens, 1991). Understanding our own lives and making sense of pivotal events as unique individualized pathways unites us with specific social spheres. In the context of prison, talking about oneself implies a specific form of bonding, a ritual of interaction, and a practice related to the internal circulation of stories (Liebling, 1999; Presser, 2004). There remain several informal restrictions regarding talking about emotions in prison (Laws, 2022). Juan (39) spoke about this when stressing the gendered norms in the penitentiary system:

I am not going to tell anyone here about my sad stories, because (...) I will not. Makes no sense, they do not care, I do not want to tell them. It might even backfire. "Look at this faggot, weeping about his lonely childhood." No one talks that way here, and it is for the better that they do not, because otherwise we will soften and will not survive a week.

According to Juan, avoiding emotions in the company of other people is pivotal to coping with life in prison. Qualitative interviews could then be a welcome opportunity to vent emotions. This was often followed by emotional outbursts, such as crying and weeping (especially among the women), but also laughter, which is an integral part of many interviews with people from marginalized backgrounds. Laughter in prison interviews can, for example, be used to criticize authorities, to boast, and to deal with trauma and tragic experiences (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019).

While most participants addressed the interview as a known interaction (drawing on their biographies, cultural references, and so on), a few participants talked about these conversations as a new situation that had some benefits. Dylan (41), for example, contrasted the research interview with previous interactions with a judge.

I: How did you feel after our last interview?

D: I remember that I felt good at that time, that I could express myself. One knows that, perhaps, one is expressing something that has already happened and that many times when I told those stories, I expected something in return. For instance, I do not know, when talking to a judge (...) Here, I did it from another perspective, aware that it was an interview.

In terms of venting emotions, talking with prison psychologists may be akin to a research interview. However, participants were often careful about what they said to prison psychologists or were skeptical about the therapeutic dimension in meetings with them. As Nicolás (33) stated, "In prison, in the penitentiary system, people are analyzed from a psychological point of view, which is different from the outside. Whatever you might say may become an obstacle for the freedom to go back to your family."

Participants emphasized that it could be difficult to have an open conversation with prison psychologists, because they were usually in charge of diagnosis as well as evaluation and associated benefits. The poor relationships with prison psychologists could inadvertently influence relationships with researchers. In our experience with open life-story interviews where interviewees were allowed to influence both topics discussed and the order of the conversation, this was rarely a problem. The interviews differed substantially from the conversations they had with psychologists. This might be different in more structured qualitative interviews.

Prisoners sometimes saw researchers as part of the system, and sometimes as their ally. The latter could be contentious. Hugo (41), convicted of femicide, sought the support of the interviewer regarding his view on gender movements. "Feminism destroyed society. These new words they are creating make no sense. Machirulo (male-chauvinist), patriarchy, whatever. Femicide is . . . what does it mean? It is just a political move. You understand it, don't you?" The open and neutral interview style comes with a risk of being drawn into conversations where destructive worldviews are affirmed, but this was not common in our research project.

Ariel (24) said the interview went well because "*it feels nice, for a change, to have a conversation with someone who is not judging you, evaluating you, or expecting something in return. Or wanting to screw you! Wait, are you? (laughs)*". Rodrigo (41) stated something similar, but less humorously and more straightforwardly:

I do not care if I make a good impression on you. When I talk about my life in court, I have to convince them. To get benefits, you have to express remorse. But in this report, I can be honest. This is my story. Period.

It can be argued that vulnerable groups get little out of participating in research and that interviews lack relevance for their current situation, be it legal, educational, or institutional. The interview can still be a way to claim ownership to one's own story and provide an opportunity to regain agency in an otherwise oppressive setting. When Rodrigo states that he is "honest", however, this must be interpreted with a little reservation. While this expresses a level of trust in the researcher and the research context, stories are always adjusted to the context (Presser, 2004) and express a particular version of lived life. In this sense the statement that "*this is my story*" probably better reflects Rodrigo's sentiment than the epistemological status of the interview data.

Venting emotions can be a reason to participate in research, but it can also limit participation. Addressing sensitive, painful, or uncomfortable issues was sometimes associated with a decision to quit the study, but as previous research suggested (Cervantes et al., 2019), viewing the interview as an emotional outlet was primarily a motivation to join and continue participation. Emotional venting is intertwined in self-improvement stories and can be linked to the emotional impact and benefits of presenting what we describe as alternative stories.

Alternative Stories

Expressing a need to be heard was another common reason for wanting to participate. As opposed to the first two, this narrative was directed more toward an external audience and less toward healing of the self. The alternative stories they wanted to tell were often associated with a wish to present their side of the story regarding the crimes they were imprisoned for, but could also be an attempt to redeem their true selves (Copes et al., 2015). The eagerness to be interviewed was associated with the interview being an opportunity to contest the judiciary or penal system's interpretation of their lives.

María (28) was charged with the sexual assault and prostitution of her underage sister. The interview provided a narrative space to tell her story and distance herself from what she perceived as a wrongful sentence.

I am doomed here. They call me infanto (sex offender of minors). Life is a living hell. Being charged for any sexual crime, especially involving minors, is the worst offense. If you ask me, it is important to tell my real story, because otherwise I would go mad. I need a confidant and ally who can believe my words (weeps).

Allies, confidants, believers, and witnesses of the truth (*testigo de la verdad*) were sometimes used as references to

explain research participation. The main purpose was to convey a meaning, state a truth, and contest an imposed identity (Fiftal Alarid & Lisa Vega, 2010). People in prison harbor deep mistrust for the penal system. They often describe institutional staff as people who are either not interested in their version of the story, or who do not trust them. In the words of Diego (36), "*A psychologist interviewed me when I came here and said: You should not worry, just talk whatever you like. You are now a prisoner and prisoners lie. And then she left, slamming the door.*" In Latin America, suspicion and distrust in public institutions goes beyond prisons (Parra Saiani et al., 2021) and it can be challenging to gain prisoners' trust.

Simultaneously, the possibility of having a space to tell an alternative story encouraged participants. It was, as Debora (21) said, "*a bet*" on their behalf.

This anxiety and the need to be heard, wanting to be understood by somebody else takes time. Perhaps with words, it will not be enough. Getting to know someone takes time, or letting him or her tell you their story, what truly happened. This is part of a process. When I met you, I was, I do not know, felt fishy. Why would I trust you and why would you believe me? But, I took a shot. It was a bet (...) It is hard to speak your mind here, where everyone is "innocent" (air quotes).

Debora's confession demonstrates that interviewees' willingness to be interviewed is fluid and nuanced. Trust can emerge from confidence in the research project or setting, but more often it is shaped by social interaction dynamics (Tewksbury & Gagné, 2001) and emerges from the continuous interaction and conversation with researchers. This is particularly the case with ethnography, and when research comprises repeated interviews. Both trust and motivations to participate in research change as the research progresses and interview relationship changes. In our experience, trust is gradually built through a series of interviews and the motivation to participate may change from the more concrete and practical (access to snacks and potential for change) to the more therapeutic (emotional outlet, healing and self-improvement).

Participants who treated the interview as an opportunity to tell an alternative story saw it as a space where they could attempt to build a different self from the one imposed on them by more powerful actors (Goffman, 1961). Considering the skepticism toward anything related to established penal institutions, a crucial question was how the researchers were viewed. The motivation of telling a different kind of story was more prevalent when interviewers were not viewed as being part of the prison system.

The Potential for Personal and Systemic Change

The stories that motivated participation were connected to different ways participants believed that research could

change their situation or facilitate changes in the judicial system (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2016). This was sometimes related to their presentation of an alternative—or “their own”—story. In broader terms, this motivation was associated with the hope that someone would consider their story and create another outcome. Most interviewees acknowledged that participation would most likely not change their situation, but some fed the expectation that doing so would bring some change, either personally or systemically (i.e., in the judicial system). Hernán (37) said:

My cousin talked to a journalist from (names mainstream national paper), and that bolstered his cause in the courthouse. Because things stirred up and the head of prison did not want any trouble, he was put under house arrest. Therefore, you never know; but this system sucks, so we must resort to other strategies.

Diego (41) was more pessimistic about his prospects, but added that there was chance of more systemic change, which motivated him:

I know, you will not show these recordings to the judge. But who knows? Maybe, someday, when they read an article you write, they will realize it is me. Not even that, they might just learn from this or other studies, and they will change their ways. Change the way they lock us all in here.

Rumors and stories about the impact of academic studies were sometimes brought up. The objective of the study, its scope, and possible dissemination were spoken and inquired about by people in prison in both countries. Motivation to participate could thus be an active way of seeking change, whether it was related to the penal circumstances of the incarcerated population or to their own situation. Moreover, this could sometimes be linked to the way they felt about prison and the judicial system. Some believed that judges, politicians, prison staff, journalists, and policymakers would view their story differently if it came from someone else. Germán (30), for example, stated:

No one gives a fuck about us in here or out there. But, when the news picks up a moving story about prison, or an NGO starts a campaign for poor prisoners (mocking tone) in horrible conditions, things change. Or I hope they do!

Some participants related this potential for change with a desire to help, sometimes for mutual aid and at other times for altruistic concerns. Sebastián (25) mentioned his interest in helping the researcher not only by participating in the research, but also by recruiting others to take part in the research:

At first, I thought I could help you. If it is to help someone, I am in. So, I agreed to talk to you, to help you in what you are studying (...) I even talked to some of the other guys (people in prison), tried to convince them and told them you were cool. I said, ‘this

guy knows a lot; he can teach you stuff. And they will listen to me, because they know that I am wittier or, at least, that I know how things work here.’

Participation in research affects the social dynamics in prison: It can be used as a marker of who is important or centrally placed in the institutions. In this sense, it can help presentation of selves and identities (as someone who helps, as someone interested in ‘educational’ activities, etc.) that may benefit prisoners’ status.

Short-term benefits, opportunities to be viewed differently in the prison’s social system, and larger expectations for individual and systemic change were reasons for participation. Desire for social reform and individual change were equally mentioned in the interviews (Bosworth et al., 2005; Overholser, 1987). This showed how prisoners could sometimes view and employ their stories as resources. Some participants had exaggerated beliefs regarding research impact. Simultaneously, such effects are difficult to estimate in advance, and given prisoners’ circumstances, they had little to lose from trying.

Skepticism Toward the Interview

While the primary message from interviews was that participants appreciated being interviewed—before, during and after interviews—there were some who voiced skepticism. In addition, participants could sometimes formulate an overall positive attitude, but still mention potential problems. Sergio (25), for example, stated:

Comprehending and understanding are not the same, right? Because you can understand when someone lives something, because you listen and you know what they are saying. But to comprehend is to relate more deeply, to have experienced that same thing, right? So, you might understand, but not truly comprehend, because you haven’t lived it. At least, that is what I think(...) You will only understand a part of my story.

Although Sergio revealed great enthusiasm for the project and helped with recruitment, he underlined that the researcher would never get access to his full story or be able to fully understand criminal environments and prison. This way, he maintained a privileged stance for the participants and drew the line for the researchers. He continued to criticize extractivist research practices: “*This is not the zoo. I see people, journalists, students, come and go every month, doing interviews, surveys, asking for papers and files. We are not here for your entertainment.*”

As Epele (2007) points out, suspicion and mistrust can be an effective technique to establish boundaries, “mark territories,” and oppose unequal social positions. Sergio concluded by reclaiming agency and expertise: “*When I can help, I will. But I can tell the difference between people who will just visit once.*” The zoo metaphor is a reminder not to idealize the interview (Buetow, 2013) and warns about some potential dangers of conducting research in marginalized environments.

Finally, some participants mentioned that they adjusted their stories to what they thought people would hear. Nicolás (33) explicitly talked about adjustment as a survival strategy:

I know it is not the same to talk to everyone here, in the penitentiary system, especially when you are evaluated. Because you would say something one way to your peers (población), another way to the board, another to the psychologist, and so on. So, you obviously adjust, for survival.

Additionally, Nicolás included outsiders, such as journalists and researchers, on the list of people he would modify his story for: “I would not tell you some of the stories of this place, you wouldn’t get them, even if you think you would.” Knowing how to tell a story, whom to trust, and how to shape events was frequently mentioned as a primal rule in prison. This is equally important in most other contexts. People in prison were conscious of telling stories as a practice that needed to be learned and rehearsed.

I will not spit against the wind (escupir para arriba). No one would (...) You know what not to say. I mean, I am here because I screwed up, obviously (laughs), but that does not mean that everyone is jumping around here speaking up their mind (...) One learns who to trust, perhaps after some unsuccessful attempts (Norberto, 33).

Adjusting self-presentations is common in all social contexts (Goffman, 1959). In the context of prison research or research on people suspected of committing crimes, this is even more notable for they have a lot at stake (Tewksbury & Gagné, 2001). Interviews are never risk-free endeavors: They imply perceived hazards, meticulous decisions, and the shaping of their stories for multiple purposes. Ultimately, qualitative interviews with prisoners on topics like violent crimes are shaped fundamentally by the politics of truth (Foucault, 1997; Robben, 1996) of the prison field.

Discussion

Participants provided a multitude of reasons for taking part in our research project. The more pragmatic reasons, such as access to snacks and a break from the common areas or boredom, did not play a large part in the responses recorded. Arguably, this could be because they may have seemed less legitimate (more difficult to “admit” to researchers). There may also have been other motivations for participation that the prisoners, for various reasons, hesitated to reveal. Therefore, what we have emphasized was not necessarily the *only* reasons or motivations for participation, but rather the main *stories* facilitating research participation that were provided in this narrative and social context. We still believe that these stories played the main role in participants’ decision to take part in the research.

The four main reasons participants provided for participating in the research—or the stories that facilitated

participation—can be divided into two meta-themes. These reflect some “participant orientations” and “ethical contracts” conceptualized in a recent study (Bredal et al., 2022). The most important were viewing the interview as therapeutic aid in self-improvement (religious, social, relational, personal), or as a temporary relief of emotions, which can be seen as participants “telling for oneself” (Bredal et al., 2022, p. 7–8). These dynamics were strengthened in the sequence of three interviews, since social interaction over time made the interview a space of trust and social support. Another meta-theme can be seen in the way participants were ‘telling for others’ (Bredal et al., 2022, p. 8–11). This was most clearly seen when the alternative stories were oriented towards journalists, the prison system etc. and when participants voiced hope for personal or systemic change.

On a more critical note, the therapeutic reasons for participation can be seen as embedded in lay theories of the penal system (Bottoms, 2006), where participants had internalized parts of the therapeutic discourse of the prison system (Di Marco, 2022; Jarman, 2019; Stone, 2016). Importantly however, people in prison also resisted these institutions by rejecting prison psychologists and navigating official discourses in creative ways. Moreover, it is problematic if hope, rumors, and expectations about personal or systemic change are crucial reasons for choosing to participate (Bosworth & Kellezi, 2016), illustrating the limitations of formalized informed consent (Roberts & Indermaur, 2003; 2008). It may be in place to warn researchers of taking advantage of such beliefs when recruiting participants, as not all interview-based studies have an intentional aim, or even capacity, to address change, treatment or provide trained support (Brettel, 1993). Still, and as long as the research participation does not harm anyone, the personal therapeutic benefits can be considerable. Since research has the potential for to contribute to systemic change, this is also an argument for participation.

All the stories that facilitated research participation implied the prisoners’ hope regarding participation having some kind of positive outcome—mainly for themselves, but also for others. Being asked to provide a reason (for anything) is an act of rationalization that pushes participants to pursue a reflective process and imagine possible outcomes (Butler, 2005). Because they have already agreed to participate these rationalizations will typically be positive, explaining, and justifying their participation. Replies would probably have been different if we had access to those that did not to participate, and who had to rationalize their decision not to take part in the study. These were few however, indicating that we have access to the most important stories about what it might be possible to gain from participating in research.

As Presser (2005) suggests, the interview is a vehicle for narrating the self as a moral character. Interviewees in prison were given a chance to talk about themselves, and to ask and contest evaluations of their crimes. Motivations for participation are often linked to been heard (Bosworth et al., 2005) and participation in research may encourage reflexive

engagement with one's own life (Knapik, 2016), which may be rare in these institutions. Regarding the prospect of interviews in terms of self-improvement, venting of emotions, and opening a space for alternative stories, participants' own experiences are crucial. If interviewees experience it as therapeutic or positive in other ways, this is key to understanding their consent and justifying their participation. When it comes to expectations for future outcomes however, things get more complicated, as these are not usually experienced until after the end of the research process.

Interviews provided the participants an opportunity to address power imbalances and express their feelings of confinement and social injustice. Topics such as criticism of the prison's psychologists, lack of trust in the legal system, and even academic extractivism were used to claim uneven relationships and lack of "voice" (Plummer, 2011). While rarely explicitly expressed, denouncing pernicious power relationships seemed to be an underpinning motivation in most of the participants' stories. As Presser (2005) argues however, participants were not merely sources of social criticism, but used these interviews in a multitude of ways, most importantly to present themselves in a positive light. Hence, power in the interviews was continuously negotiated, echoing both what the interviewee wanted to talk about and the agenda of the researcher. Further understanding what motivates people to participate in research allows for a more nuanced comprehension of recruitment processes, the interview dynamics, and the qualitative research process.

Conclusion

We conducted this research in a particular context (Argentina and Chile) with a specific population (people in prison). Our results might not be transferable to other places and contexts, but we see similarities with existent research and our prior experiences from fieldwork in other countries. Arguably, the reasons people provide for participating in research may crystallize in prison research. The prison context makes self-improvement more warranted, and venting of emotions more important. The opportunity to present an alternative story and the hope for changes may also be more desperate. It is crucial to explore these reasons for participation in research in depth, and not simply take the benefits of interviews for participants for granted in attempts at justifying qualitative research.

This study emphasized reasons and narratives facilitating research participation. We also examined stories that highlighted skepticism towards the interview—mainly regarding getting complete stories, their contextual adjustments, putting feelings on display, and lack of agency. These underline another, and maybe even more important, area of study, namely the stories underlying people's decisions *not* to participate in or withdraw from qualitative research. Only when a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative landscape surrounding research participation is facilitated, can we fully

address the more complex questions of consent, why people decide to participate in research and what they may derive from it.

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