

## Making sense of a murder in Mexico

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*In this paper I reflect on the role intersubjectivity played in contact with Ernesto, a 32 years-old man who is in prison for the murder of his wife. When I meet Ernesto in 2006 he presents himself as the victim of a dysfunctional family, drug abuse, and his violent prison environment, a narrative that I find myself moving along with. Intersubjectivity is a way to come to a joint knowledge production. However, intersubjectivity will not always occur in (research) relationships. Intersubjectivity requires self-reflection, which does not always take place, and the ability to connect with another. It might therefore be better to think of intersubjectivity as a passing occurrence, an intersubjective moment rather than a description of a relationship. At the end of this article, I relate how during a short fieldtrip in 2007, Ernesto and I reflected on the creation of the story of the killing of his wife. Both of our statuses in prison have changed, and the story is now presented in a different light, showing how our positionality colours the knowledge we jointly produce.*

*[intersubjective moments, positionality, violence, murder, prison, Mexico]*

This paper has its roots in fieldwork conducted in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico, researching (domestic) violence in relation to masculinities and substance abuse. In Quintana Roo, much attention is given to the problem of domestic violence. Listening to the radio, announcements against domestic violence can be heard at regular intervals, the newspaper shows adds that urge people to report cases of domestic violence if they know of them, there is a local government agency doing research on reports of domestic violence. Quintana Roo is reportedly the State with one of the highest reports of domestic violence; possibly because the actual number of cases of domestic violence is very high, but the high number of reports might also reflect a high awareness of the possibility of reporting domestic violence and a decreasing acceptance of domestic violence. There are quite a few organizations that were working with victims and sometimes perpetrators of domestic violence and some of these gave me access to do research.

For a couple of months I was allowed access to a 'men's group' where perpetrators of violence came to talk about their violence. I conducted a 'women's group' in a local health centre. I held workshops in a home for 'run away young women'. I researched an 'Alcoholics Anonymous' group. My access to the different research fields I always

felt as precarious, I might be welcomed today and refused access tomorrow. I therefore tried to do as many different things as possible in order to always have access somewhere. Beginning 2006 I asked, and was allowed, to do research in a prison, assuming that many of the inmates would be perpetrators of violent acts against their spouse. It was thus that I came to meet the prisoner Ernesto.

This paper is based on the interviews I had with Ernesto from February to May 2006, and during a short field trip February 2007. When meeting in 2006, Ernesto had recently been incarcerated for the killing of his wife, he was trying to come to terms with what he had done, and was struggling to survive within the violent prison environment where he is likely to spend the next fifteen to twenty years. Our meetings revolved around a making sense of this murder, and his life in prison. When coming back in 2007, Ernesto has gained a leading position in prison. In both fieldwork episodes intersubjective moments occur in our contact. While we initially find a connection in our mutual bewilderment of what is going on in prison, our later contacts take place in a more relaxed atmosphere, with both of us feeling acquainted and safe in our surroundings. With our changed position also the way the story about the killing is given a different shade of meaning.

### **Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity is a complex concept; beginning to unravel its meaning needs an explanation of subjectivity. In line with post-structuralist thinking the subject can be seen as lacking solidity and fixedness. Considering the subject as constructed through multiple discourses leads to a view of the subject as variable, in process, consisting of multiple subjectivities (Waugh 1998). Intersubjectivity consists of those moments when there is recognition; when the subjectivity of the one can link with that of the other; joining in a process of thinking together, of creating knowledge. Intersubjectivity seems to be more than just talking together about a certain topic, there is a feeling of connection, of knowing what the other is saying, and a supplementing of each others knowledge. Intersubjectivity lies within the realm of experience, which makes it such a complicated issue; its occurrence is not something that can be observed from the outside, it is experienced by the ones who have this intersubjective link, and even they cannot be sure the feeling is mutual.

The occurrence of intersubjectivity within research relationships is not self-evident. Our epistemological position can either hamper or stimulate its possible occurrence. For example, in my previous research into prostitution (van Wijk 2006) my etic viewpoint did not come together with the population's own general perceptions of what was going on. Prostitution was generally not something my research subjects wanted to reflect upon. While actively gathering research data, nonetheless I didn't feel that I really connected with my research subjects. Moments of intersubjectivity occurred when I wasn't positioning myself as a researcher who was holding on to her own etic viewpoints.

This potential clash between emic and etic viewpoints is a complex issue within anthropological research. Writing about the 'other' is giving a representation of the other's reality, which is never reality in itself. Ethnography enables making knowledge intersubjectively, in dialogue. At the same time the writing is often not the literal dialogue itself (Fabian 1990). The value of an outsider researching a formerly unknown society is this adding of a new perspective; it is not the mimicking of what is common knowledge for the insiders. However this is also potentially problematic, because who we are and what we are influences how we experience our field of knowledge, and the information that will come from that field. We therefore need to position our knowledge, by showing our own positionality in terms of race, class, gender; thus it will also become clear that no universal knowledge claims can be drawn from our research (Rose 1997: 308). Showing our situatedness could be expanded to less permanent positions like our moods and mindsets at a given moment. Daily emotional aspects of our situatedness may give a certain shade and colour to the field data produced intersubjectively. As for my own, more permanent, situatedness: I am a thirty seven years old, white female anthropologist, I have previously worked as a psychiatric nurse for seventeen years, eleven of which in a clinic for addicted patients. The research into violence, masculinity and substance abuse has many overlaps with my work as a psychiatric nurse. Therefore, I was hoping that it would be easier to understand the life worlds of my research subjects, and to experience those intersubjective moments more often by taking their experiences as departure point in the process of making knowledge together.

The word 'experience' is such part of our daily language, its meaning so commonsensical that we hardly ever think about what we mean when using the word. Desjarlais (1994) notes that we could equate experience with an awareness of living. 'Experience' has come to mean something more than just being alive when something happens; it indicates something that is more deeply felt. Desjarlais explains experience as being related to introspection: "Experience thus readily equates with a person's 'inner life' or 'consciousness' and is often synonymous with subjectivity" (Desjarlais 1994: 888). Experience is transformative; it entails renewal, of tying together things through time (ibid 896). Living is not always experiencing in this reflexive way, sometimes people just struggle along through life without reflecting, thus without really experiencing (ibid). For intersubjective moments to occur we do need reflection, and being conscious of our subjectivity.

## **The field**

Researchers are often assumed to be in a relatively strong power position in relation to their research subject. Bourdieu argues that it is the investigator who starts the game and sets the rules; this asymmetric power relationship is deepened when the researcher possesses more cultural capital and ranks higher in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1996: 609). However, power relations are constantly negotiated and researchers may in fact not have much control within their research setting (Nencel

2005). The hierarchical structuring of social life in Quintana Roo becomes salient in almost all social interactions. People are referred to by their social roles or their educational title. My nursing degree combined with my master's degree thus gave me the cultural capital for a high ranking on the hierarchical ladder. In some fields I was therefore warmly welcomed; in the AA for example some people expressed their joy that someone as highly educated as me would come to their group. In other locations my cultural capital seemed to convey a mixed blessing. In the man's therapy group I attended some of the therapists embraced the opportunity of working together with me as a possibly mutual enriching experience. Others seemed averse to an outsider, with experiences in similar therapeutic settings in the Netherlands, looking into their operation. The power struggles among the therapists determined my position in the organization, and in the end were responsible for the discontinuation of my participation in the group. Whenever my presence was allowed and sometimes even appreciated, it was on the grounds of my being a psychiatric nurse, which was usually translated as *sicologa*, Spanish for psychologist.

The criminal sections of the newspapers portray pictures of men who have actually been taken into custody after having committed violent crimes in their homes. As a researcher investigating domestic violence, with a focus on men, the local prison seemed like a good location to do research. The prison houses about two hundred men, and a couple of women in a separate section. The director of the prison welcomed my initiative to come and talk to the men; he thought it might 'unload' the men to talk about themselves. In prison like in most other field locations introducing myself as an anthropologist didn't seem to strike any cords. However adding that I was a psychiatric nurse with years of experience with addicted patients opened doors. The director also persistently named me *sicologa* despite my repeated explanations of being an anthropologist and psychiatric nurse.

Although preferring individual interviews, I initially talked to the men in groups, since the director thought it would antagonize the guards to escort men out of the prison individually, because of the extra work it entailed for them. These group interviews, with men selected by the director were conducted in his own office; because he said he could not guarantee my safety inside the prison. The group interviews took place with four prisoners who were escorted in while their feet were cuffed together. The guards who brought them in would then leave.

The director appeared to appreciate participating in the interviews himself. During the first interview, the director stated that most of the prisoners are in prison innocently: "There are many people here who are innocent, who haven't committed the crime, in the case of this man, (one of the interviewees present) he is also imprisoned innocently, they are looking for people to blame"<sup>1</sup>. The director tries to connect with the prisoners by pointing out their innocence. The director even shares a bit of his own background by talking about his own abusive and alcoholic parents. While I initially thought it was very sweet to see how the director sought to find a common ground with his prisoners, I later on understood that there might be a different explanation. The bonds formed with the prisoners might stabilize his position. He told me on various occasions how much it mattered to him to have a good relationship with

the inmates, because he didn't want any trouble inside his prison. Initially he seemed to regard me as someone who might help his popularity; his position was stabilized if the inmates were happy. It wasn't until later that I fully understood how unstable the director's position was; he constantly had to negotiate his own position within the power structures around him.

After having done a couple of these group interviews I encountered a group in which one of the prisoners refused to talk to me in Spanish. He said he wanted to talk to me, but not in Spanish where the director could hear what he was saying. The other men in the group agreed that they would prefer to talk individually since that would make it possible for them to go deeper into their issues. Ernesto was the one of those men.

My first appointment with Ernesto is in the office of the director. Ernesto is brought in by the guards with his feet cuffed together. His appearance is quite striking, he is tall, his straight black hair, and his angular nose make him appear to be a direct descendent of the Aztecs. I find him to be handsome and friendly looking. Ernesto's voice is light, and his posture is timid.

Assuming that the last group meeting had been unsuccessful largely due to the inability to trust each other, I begin the interview asking whether he needs to be on guard. Ernesto explains that signs of weaknesses will be used against you: those who appear to be weak need to wash and clean; they eat last, and are played with. I ask Ernesto how he is played with, explaining my unfamiliarity with prison life. He redirects this question to the director: "How much freedom is there to talk?"<sup>2</sup>, evoking a long evasive comment from the director:

For me there aren't any prisoners, there are no bad guys, for me there are people who have made a mistake.... I prefer to call the people who have been in a fight because they are stressed out, I call them, they give each other a hand, an embrace, they have to recognize the problem, give a hand and move on!<sup>3</sup>

The director's evasiveness seems to convey plural messages; he once more emphasizes his commitment towards the prisoners, but also downplays the existence of violence in prison, signalling to Ernesto not to be too open about the topic. In our later interviews the violence Ernesto is subjected to will be one of the topics most reflected on, in this first interview Ernesto only shows a tip of the violence he experiences, he mostly reflects on the reason why he is in prison, the killing of his wife.

## **The murder**

Our first interview took place seven months to the date after Ernesto had killed his wife.

Ernesto: "I am mortified by what I have done, I didn't do it to a person who was bad to me, no, a person who was exceptional, Jolanda was the most honest and best person I ever knew" (voice quivers)....

Joan: "Her name was Jolanda?"

Ernesto: "yes."

Joan: "Jolanda"

Ernesto: "The name of my partner. She suffered so much because of my addiction, she suffered so much".<sup>4</sup>

Ernesto directly links the murder to his addiction to crack. Before meeting Jolanda, Ernesto had struggled for three years with his addiction; he had been in groups of Alcoholics Anonymous, and various other groups and retreats trying to conquer his crack addiction.

Ernesto: "So when I met her I was in a period of abstinence, and she told me she had just separated from someone with a drug addiction. (I told her) I did drugs but now I don't, and we had a good life, we got along great together as a couple, until I started to do drugs again. When she discovered that I was doing drugs again, she said she was going to leave me: "I am going to give you up, I love you a lot but you have to get better, you have to get better..." but, I seemed like I couldn't stop myself. The addiction to crack, I never used other drugs, ironically I never did drugs before and I got to know the most addictive drugs that I know..."

Joan: "yes..., yes"<sup>5</sup>

Ernesto: "...when I stopped using drugs the battle inside started...(I saw a) a tin can, and I thought I can make a pipe out of this can, I made money and thought how much can I buy with this money, I tried not to think this way but it is a battle, a battle inside..."

Joan: "yes"

Ernesto: "... finally I lost the battle because of pressure, because of excuses, we look for a reason, an excuse..."

Joan: "huhuh"<sup>6</sup>

Ernesto: "When I started using again I tried to, even to separate from her, but she didn't let me go.... She threatened with a knife, like this on her throat: 'if you go I will kill myself'..."<sup>7</sup>

They end up in a vicious circle where Ernesto episodically drugs himself and Jolanda attempts to kill herself. After these dramatic episodes things would calm down again for five or ten days, in which Ernesto would abstain from using drugs, after which it all would start again. Ernesto had never been violent; having been subjected to an abusive, uncaring mother, and a neglectful addicted father, he did not want to repeat his parents' example:

With or without drugs I am not violent: I hate violence because I was raised in this circle, with so much violence and abuse. But, but, I was drugged and I didn't want to see her suffer...<sup>8</sup>

He had not been violent until the day that he locked himself up in their apartment in order to use crack. Jolanda was not deterred by the closed door and entered the apart-

ment through the window; she found Ernesto inside drugged. A fight follows in which she tries to drink a bottle of chloride.

Ernesto "...when we finished [fighting] we sat on the bathroom floor, I wanted to hold her and she was hitting herself and told me: 'I cannot live like this, I won't let you go, I don't know what to do to help you, but I cant keep on living like this....Then she took my hands...on her neck and told me: 'Do it, do it, this way it is easier', and I did ... (silence) and I did, ...seven months... seven months [voice quivers, cries]."<sup>9</sup>

The killing haunts Ernesto. After killing Jolanda, Ernesto hides for a couple of months, but in the end he is afraid that he will start using again, and of what will happen when he does. The fear and anxiety after using a lot of crack is enormous, and Ernesto has been hearing voices. After killing Jolanda, he still heard her crying and pleading him to stop using drugs.

### **Holding on to a narrative that I can deal with**

The director has introduced me as *la sicologa* and during my talk with Ernesto it is clear that he relates to me as if I were his *sicologa*. I had in fact consented to counsel one man who had explicitly asked me to help him with his *enfermedad violencia* (violence sickness), while he allowed me to use the data for my research. With Ernesto I was kind of in a grey area, I wanted to interview him to gain knowledge, but it was clear that he consented because he hoped it would have a therapeutic effect for him to talk. For me the role of psychiatric nurse is so natural, so engraved in my being that I easily slid into my habitus as a nurse. This habitus at times helps me through difficult situations; I am less vulnerable I have my tools to get me through painful stories, and I know what to ask to keep the word flow going. It might also help creating communications at an intersubjective level: I have learned to be emphatic, to picture the reality of the other, and to adequately respond.

Ernesto's revelations about his childhood had been very sad, but it was not new for me to hear stories of neglect and abuse, and I guess I adequately responded to him and gave him the feeling that I understood for the words kept on coming. However listening to how he killed his wife was a different matter. I had worked with men who killed before but never on the topic of killing, and they had never told me about the killing they had done. I was utterly unprepared when I heard Ernesto's story. On the other hand his hallucinations were the familiar territory that I could cling to in my frantic search to make sense of something so unimaginable to me.

Ernesto told me that the hallucinations did not only occur under the influence of drugs but had been there for a long time. I wondered whether it was possible that he had killed while being psychotic. So I asked him about it like I would do as a nurse: how many voices are there, do you recognize them, and how do you feel when you have them? I guess it would have been easier for me to make sense of this murder had it been done while being psychotic, maybe even under the influence of imperative hal-



lucinations. Ernesto answers my questions but does not seem overly keen to talk about the subject. Although making sense of what he has done is about all what preoccupies him, his hallucinations do not seem to give him the answers that he is looking for.

The interview left me shattered. The devastation Ernesto had felt had been palpable, I had experienced him as a very smart and friendly man and I felt so sorry for him. At the same time confused for feeling sorry for him, whereas it would be much more in line with good reason to feel sorry for his dead wife and her children, why was I drawn into his world? The way I slipped into Ernesto's reality, without scepticism and doubt about the way he portrays his reality to me, is actually quite contrary to how I am used to confronting the narratives of my patients. Working with addicted patients to whom lying is often necessary to keep their addiction going; I don't normally take a story as it is presented to me as the unequivocal truth. The reason that I become absorbed in the victim story and do not try to set the story within a different perspective seems to reflect my inability to deal with something so horrid and black as murder.

The second interview with Ernesto, again in the presence of the director, starts in relaxed atmosphere. Ernesto and the director seem to be in tune with each other, and I listen to how they paint the picture of the prison as a space where people can redeem and develop themselves. The director who is a former boxer is talking about how he introduced boxing in prison as a stress outlet for the prisoners. Apart from sports he gives possibilities to the prisoners to work inside. Ernesto adds to the director's words telling me that the prison offers a lot of possibilities to learn skills and develop yourself. At this point I have never been inside the prison so I take their word for it.

During this and the following interviews it will appear that Ernesto desperately needs to believe that being in prison will actually make him a better person for he has turned himself in. Over the course of the next visits to him and other prisoners inside the prison, outside of the director's earshot it will become clear that doing time for committing a crime is not at all an inevitable consequence. Most of the prisoners seem to fall in the following categories, they are caught in the act of a criminal offence with not enough (stolen) cash on them to bribe the police, they did not know they were committing an offence, they hoped to get away with it, or they were too high on drugs or alcohol to escape to a different state. Ernesto does not fall in any of those categories. He was a free man for a couple of months before he decided to give himself up. Criminal cases usually are not dealt with nation wide but on a state level; Ernesto could have gone to another state and nobody would ever have been looking for him. Even in state of Quintana Roo nobody was looking for him since the police had lost the warrant for Ernesto's arrest.

Ernesto tells me that of all prisoners he is considered to be the most stupid one. He could have been out there a free man, instead he has chosen to be in the place where no one else wants to be and this has alienated him from the others who will leave no opportunity unused to rub his stupidity in. Ernesto is constantly provoked, sworn at and sexually intimidated. Despite the fact that he is tall, and used to practice karate, he is defenceless against these provocations. He has proved to be able to kill and fear of doing so again has brought him to this prison in this defenceless position.



During our second interview Ernesto is telling me how he tries to connect with the other prisoners, being liked has always been of great importance to him. However it appears to be much easier for him to talk about the other prisoners than with them. Ernesto knows how to connect with me by talking about books and Mayan culture. I feel Ernesto's desperation of having to deal with a world, which rules he doesn't understand. While listening to the tape of the second interview I noticed how I smoothly slid back into my nurse habitus: my tools in a helpless situation. I hear myself giving him advice on how to deal with his hallucinations, how to relax, I reassure him in his decision of having turned himself in, better to be here than outside using crack.

### **Inside prison**

After having had several individual interviews with various prisoners in the directors office the director tells me he cannot facilitate them anymore. He said the guards had become suspicious; especially because some of the interviews had been conducted in English, which the guards do not speak. As I later understood from the prisoners, the director is in a constant power struggle with the commander. While the director is in charge of the prison and the prisoners, the commander is in charge over the policemen who guard the prison. Apparently I was a peon in their battle, but now had lost my use. So I proposed to the director that I continue inside the prison, to which he consents.

Entering prison is quite an experience that took me some getting used to. First the guards search your luggage. What you can or cannot take with you depends to some extent on which guard searches you; you can bring in almost anything that cannot easily be used to hurt themselves or others. I would always bring the prisoners, and now and again the guards, some food, sometimes I would bring books and toiletries. My cell phone, keys and tape recorder always had to be left behind. I initially greatly regretted not being able to record the interviews inside, since it meant I had to depend solely on my memory. Afterwards I was partly pleased; the content of the interviews became quite different in its absence. Things have been confided to me which would have been unsafe to have on tape.

After my luggage, I was searched in a separate space by a female guard. After lifting up my shirt and bra, I had to lift up my skirt, pull down my panties and bent through my knees a couple of times, checking for contraband hidden in my body. Although the guards always treated me respectfully it was hard not to feel the humiliation of the situation. Once you are thoroughly checked the guards bring you to the department you need to be in, they open the door, yell out to the prisoner and then leave you inside. For there are no guards inside, the guards are on the roofs and in the corridors in between the different section, but inside the departments the prisoner's rule.

This, and all the next visits much of my energy and awareness goes to taking in what is happening to me and around me. Ernesto and I find each other in this process of trying to make sense of this extraordinary masculine world. When I meet Ernesto he has only been in prison for about four months and is still completely wrapped up in the process of figuring out what is going on around him and how he can deal with

that. Unlike most of the prisoners around him, Ernesto is a first timer. He used to be focused on educating himself, learning languages, equipping himself with knowledge to get good jobs, now he needs to become street wise in order to survive inside.

Ernesto is in a section of only 11 prisoners. The first time I visit him inside, it takes a while before he comes to greet me, in the meantime I am standing at the gate while the other prisoners take their time to size me up, it is quite scary. Ernesto seems pleased to see me. He looks healthy, and has a tanned complexion, when I comment on this he tells me he isn't allowed inside the cell during the day, long hours in the open sun are responsible for his dark skin. Ernesto explains that this small ward houses inmates that for some reason are dysfunctional. Ernesto was first placed in a one of the large wards but created a huge scene when his ex-wife was visiting and was harassed for money. I am constantly assessing my own safety in prison, and hearing a story such as this makes me more insecure.

In the bigger wards the prisoners I visited were assigned a cell to talk privately, but not in here with Ernesto. We have to stay in the small courtyard; we sit ourselves apart from the rest of the prisoners. Ernesto talks to me in English, which increases the distance between us and the other prisoners and gives us space to talk freely. Like two outsiders, instead of just one, we sit and discuss what is going on around us. Our mutual alienation facilitates the occurrence of intersubjective moments. By talking about the prisoners we see around us, Ernesto explains the rules of the prison to me, as he understands them at that moment. The two cells are owned by the man who is one of the biggest suppliers of drugs in the different wards. At night he cannot refuse other prisoners inside his cell but during the day the cell is his house. In front of us a few prisoners are making hammocks, this is the labour that the director and Ernesto have been discussing, and in this particular ward it is the only work available. Right now Ernesto is not so positive about its rehabilitative powers. To make a hammock you need a frame and thread. The leader of the ward has a monopoly over these supplies, and he will only lend supplies to those prisoners who will buy his drugs with the profits. Ernesto is desperately clinging to his sobriety. Staying sober gives the killing of Jolanda purpose, so he is barred from making hammocks.

When after some time I want to leave we stand at the gate and yell. However, the guard with the key (there is only one) is not available to let me out, and meanwhile our chairs have been taken. We see Elsa, the transvestite of the ward, sitting on a pile of plastic chairs surely in provocation of Ernesto. I comment to Ernesto, that as long as Elsa is in the ward at least he will not be the lowest in the hierarchy, but Ernesto says "No, she has something to offer that I don't have so I am even lower ranking than she is".

Prison is an extremely hierarchical place; money, the willingness and ability to use violence, sexual preference, and the length of the prison term, are all determining for the place you take up in the hierarchy. Ernesto says he is afraid of his own violence and initially shunts provocations. Most moneymaking businesses are one way or the other tied up with the drug trade inside prison. Whether or not Ernesto should become involved in violence or drugs is his constant struggle throughout our meetings. This question is tied up with making sense of Jolanda's death; this process is in constant flux. Sometimes Ernesto is desperate because he cannot make sense of it all, at other

times he is more at peace. In one of these more peaceful moments he called her death a *sacrificio*: Jolanda's death has enabled his rehabilitation. Involving himself in drugs or violence would undo the meaning of Jolanda's death, but is there another way to survive?

I find myself searching along with Ernesto, I feel his vulnerability and it reflects on me. While visiting the two other prisoners in the other wards I am never too preoccupied with my own safety; they are guys that will not be messed with and therefore I will not be messed with, with Ernesto I am not so sure. My anxiety borders panic when Ernesto tells me of a rape that took place, and adds that he hopes he will never receive the order to rape anyone; I realize I am on my own.

When the leader of the ward is transferred to a different prison, positions of power are renegotiated, and Ernesto gets new opportunities to climb in the hierarchy. Rio, the new ward leader is trying to take over the drug trade from the former leader, causing a competition with other minor drug dealers of the other wards. While playing basketball on the courtyard shared with the different wards Rio takes a beating, and Ernesto comes to his aid, he beats his opponent and wins Rio's esteem. Afterwards Ernesto is offered a part in the drug trade and he discusses with me whether he should take it. I find myself not being averse to the idea. We discuss the possibility of dealing without using. Prison creates new subject positions; old ones that display the norms of the outside world are being discarded as useless in this unsafe, vulnerable location.

Ernesto makes up his mind about involving himself in the drug trade. The next times I visit him he is trying hard to be part of the group. He is no longer talking to me in English; we talk Spanish, this way the whole group can participate in our conversations. After talking to one of Ernesto's fellow prisoners Ernesto comments: "Did you hear how he talked about 'us', I am part of this family now." When I ask him if the food I have given him is for everyone, he replies: "Yes of course; they are my family." In addition to the food I bring him, he thoughtlessly also takes my food.

Ernesto slowly seems to be gaining a kind of crudeness, his previously polished appearance is transforming. Ernesto walks around barefoot, giving his feet a kind of hoof-like thickness; his hands are calloused from making the hammocks he is no longer barred from. His physique is gaining a general roughness. While Ernesto's world is starting to converge with that of his fellow prisoners, my contact with him is becoming less intense. His reality is becoming like that of his fellow prisoners; geared towards a life in prison. He does not reflect so much on the experiences of this prison life anymore; he just lives it.

Desjarlais relates about his research in a shelter for the homeless, that some people just go through the motions of the days seemingly without a deep kind of reflection associated with experience; they had trouble remembering what they had done throughout the day, some said they didn't feel, they were just numb. (Desjarlais 1994: 892). Not everything people go through is processed introspectively; some things may be lived, but not really experienced. When our informants just go through the motions of the day without giving what they do an inner reflection, we are also impeded from sharing with them the meanings of the days' events. Nencel relates about the role of

silence during her research with women who prostitute. The women didn't want to reflect on their work, like one of her informants said: "...I just live for today. I don't want to think about it because I don't want to recognize how I earn my money..." (Nencel 2005: 352). As Nencel shows, their silence doesn't mean that there is no information, but that the silence is itself a source of information. However, I would argue that there is no intersubjectivity at the time you are interviewing someone about something they cannot reflect upon. Towards the end of my fieldwork episode in 2006, Ernesto seemed to be moving into a kind of numbness. He had come to an understanding of prison life and didn't need a constant reflection on it anymore; he just went through the motions. Consequently, my contact with Ernesto changed, without his reflections on his life there was nothing to relate to with my own subjectivity, hence no intersubjective moments were occurring. For me this meant that the research in Ernesto's ward changed, it wasn't the one on one contact with Ernesto anymore, but more like a group talk.

### **Intersubjectivity: together painting the bare facts**

When I met Ernesto for the first time I realized that I had heard of him and the murder. Within the AA where I did research, one of the members had given me a newspaper clipping of a drug addict who had killed his wife. I had kept the article but the story hadn't really stuck to my mind. After meeting Ernesto I looked up the article and read it again, or so I thought. Four months later, when packing my things to go back home I was reminded of how our minds can play tricks on us. While sorting out my newspaper articles, I read the one about Ernesto for a third time. For the first time my mind registers that he did not only kill his wife, he also cut her to pieces. Previously I had apparently not been able to cope with this fact, my mind shut it out.

Back home I pondered about the substance of my contact with Ernesto. Was Ernesto's crime was too ugly for me to look at, did I need to wipe out parts of it in order to connect with him? Or was it perhaps the other way around, was I unable to grasp that someone who I at moments felt this intersubjective connection with, was able to commit a gruesome crime? Were those moments of intersubjectivity even mutually felt? The difference I perceived between our chatter at the end of my research in 2006, and our previous communication may not be perceived at all by Ernesto. I moved along in the creation of a victim narrative of a man, plagued by his dysfunctional past, victim of his hallucinations and drug abuse, who finds love, kills and will pay for this random act of craziness for the years to come. What function did this story have for each one of us?

Haraway (in Rose 1997) and other scientists within the feminist research tradition have argued that researchers need to show their positionality in order to make visible how they affect the narrative. I would like to add that we should not only reflect on our permanent characteristics like gender, and race but also on our more temporal positionality that influences the field. Reflecting on my emotional situation while visiting the prison in 2006, I can say my being there made me feel apprehensive. Bourdieu (1996) refers to the position of the researcher as the one who 'started the game', but I

definitely did not feel in control once the game took off. At the time I was not aware that I could also have helped them in shaping a different narrative. The story I co-created helped me deal with my emotions. While entering the prison I am shorn of my control, I have to submit myself to the humiliating prison regime of body search and waiting to be let in and out, all in order meet with violent men. I need to believe that Ernesto's killing was an accidental one-time event; he was not a totally bad person capable of harming me too. For Ernesto this narrative is one that fits within the AA discourse he is familiar with, that of searching for redemption. His relationship with me might have given him some feeling of security in a time when he was still searching for his bearings in prison. Once he started to feel more at ease in prison, it became more rewarding to invest in the relationship with his fellow prisoners.

In February 2007 I went back Mexico and to the prison. I was met by a new director. I explained to the director the research that I had been involved in. My only remaining interviewee in prison was Ernesto. The director was very accommodating; he knew most prisoners personally and reflected on some of the cases that he thought might be interesting for the continuation of my research. He appeared to know Ernesto quite well and called him a very intelligent man whose dysfunctional family background had been an impediment for him to do well in life. To my surprise I was allowed to enter when I wanted, I was no longer subjected to the humiliating body checks and could interview any prisoner I liked.

Ernesto was very happy to see me again, and we caught up with all that has been going on inside the prison in the past months. Ernesto was doing well for himself inside; he looked healthy and smartly dressed. He had been using crack for a period of time but was now clean. He had been transferred to a different ward. There had been several violent prison riots in which Ernesto had to prove his worth several times by participating in fights. In the mean time he had obtained a leading position, and tried to use his leadership to keep his ward quiet and drug free.

The riots had been responsible for a rapid succession of different directors and commanders. The present director had offered Ernesto to help him bring his case to trial again if he would refrain from the transferral to a different prison with better facilities that he was due for. In return, the director made Ernesto's life somewhat more agreeable by permitting him to run a 'shop' selling sweets and cookies, which enabled him to earn about 100 dollars a week. According to Ernesto the director is trying to accommodate him because he needs guys like him to keep the prison quiet, without aggression, extortions and drugs.

The directors' need for cooperation has further strengthened Ernesto's position. My own position has also changed, my familiarity with the prison system, with several of the police officers and the prisoners, plus the fact that my presence as a researcher is officially acknowledged allowing me to enter without being searched, makes my position inside a lot less vulnerable. Our different position is reflected in our talks; daily survival being no longer an issue, our discussions revolve around his responsibilities towards his family and how to give a sense of purpose to his stay in prison. I find it easy to relate to him and to experience intersubjective moments.

Ernesto: "Do you remember that I said I was afraid to lose my essence?"

Joan: "Yes".

Ernesto: "Right now I think I didn't know what my essence was. I am learning a lot in here, I am always analyzing what happened."

Joan: "The death of Jolanda?"

Ernesto: "Yes, I think the only thing I can get out of this here is to become a better person. Because right now I know I wasn't such a good person as I used to think I was. Now I know I cannot believe myself. I know I cannot believe myself. In reality I am very obscure."

Joan: "So if I were to ask you now, imagine we met right now, how are you going to explain to me what you have done, would it be a different story than the one you told me before?"

Ernesto: "No the story would be the same but the *matiz*<sup>10</sup> would be different".

Joan: "What is a *matiz*?"

Ernesto: "It is like in a film, the background, the music..."

Joan: "So how would you tell it to me now, before it was a story in which you were the victim of drugs, and now?"

Ernesto: "Now I know I am very manipulative, very controlling; I wanted to continue to do drugs but Jolanda was controlling me constantly: don't smoke, (crack), don't smoke! I could hear her voice everywhere, I wanted to hide for her, I wasn't afraid for the police but for her I was afraid."

Joan: "What for?"

Ernesto: "That she would leave me, but on the other hand I also wanted her to leave me, so I could keep on using. I have to say that after doing it I also had a feeling of liberation."

A week later I ask Ernesto what role I played in creating the story with him as the victim. Ernesto says I functioned like a kind of pressure cooker, enabling him and the other interviewees to let out steam and to analyze their situation, but he cannot say what part I had in the creation of the story. According to him there is only one truth, it is just the box in which the truth is presented that changes.

## Conclusion

Intersubjectivity is the feeling of a connection, of being able to link certain aspects of yourself with the subjectivity of another. The occurrence of intersubjectivity is not a given within research situations; it implies a research position of equality, and the mutual willingness to think along side each other, together producing knowledge. Even when it does occur it may come and go; certain subjectivities link, while others don't. I therefore argue that it is better to think of intersubjective moments than of intersubjective relationships.

Since our subjectivity always plays a major role within our research, we need to make clear what our positionality is in terms of gender, race and religion. I would add

that we also need to reflect on the influence of our less permanent positionality, like our moods and research positions. Within this research into violence, intersubjective moments did occur in my contact with the prisoner Ernesto. However, as our relationship evolves and our positions change towards each other and towards our surroundings, our subjectivities change and therefore also the way we link and the content of the story we co-author.

Our contact starts during my fieldwork in 2006 shortly after Ernesto has been incarcerated after turning himself in for killing his wife. While Ernesto is still unfamiliar with the prison rules and is subjected to the violence of the inmates, he can connect with me by talking about books and culture, the things that interest him but have little meaning to most other prisoners. I experienced moments of intersubjectivity in the times that we were sitting in the prison courtyard, separated from the rest of the inmates by our mutual lack of understanding of what was going on around us, further separating ourselves by talking in English instead of Spanish. Our mutual feeling of alienation facilitates the occurrence of intersubjectivity; we connect while gossiping about the prisoners in the ward and talking about things that we both did understand. I am taken along in the narrative of a friendly man, victim of his dysfunctional past, drug use, and presently his violent surroundings. During our first contacts I can feel Ernesto's desperation, and I leave the prison devastated. Seeing him as a victim seems to be a narrative that we can both deal with. It relieves Ernesto of feeling the full responsibility of his action. For me, believing in this narrative makes me feel safer: within the already unsafe environment I do not have to fear my interviewee, someone who has killed, as well; instead I can sympathize with him.

Gradually Ernesto gets used to prison life; he seems to become numb and does not reflect much on the life he lives. Without him consciously experiencing his surroundings I can no longer link my own subjectivity with his, and I experience our contact in this period as superficial. When I get back to the prison in 2007 our positions have changed again. Ernesto finds himself in a leading position, and he is no longer numbly going through the motions of prison life, but consciously controls what he can. My own research position within prison is acknowledged and I am therefore more secure. My familiarity with the prison and with Ernesto enables a relaxed contact in which we can again experience moments of intersubjectivity. The narrative changes along with the change in our positions; or the facts are again presented in a new box.

## Notes

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- 1 *En el caso de este señor, el esta igualmente injustamente encarcelado, están buscando culpables.*
- 2 *Que tanta libertad para hablar?*
- 3 *Para mi no hay presos, no hay malandrines, para mi son personas que cometieron un error... yo prefiero, llamar las personas que se golpeaban porque son estresados, les llamo se da la mano, un abrazo, uno reconoce de ellos que hay cualquier problema, la mano y adelante!*
- 4 Ernesto: *"A mi me mortifica mucho lo que hice, no lo hice a una persona que hizo mala conmigo, no, una persona que fue excepcional. ... es esta ser humano mas noble e mas bueno que conocí..."*  
 Joan: *"Es su nombre: Jolanda?"*  
 Ernesto: *"S.í"*  
 Joan: *"Jolanda."*  
 Ernesto: *"El nombre de mi pareja, pero sufrió mucho por mi adicción, sufrió mucho."*
- 5 Ernesto: *"Entonces yo le conocí a ella cuando yo estaba en un momento en que no me drogaba, y ella me dijo: 'yo estaba acabo de separarme de una persona que se drogaba'. Yo me drogaba pero ya no le hago, y teníamos una vida buena, nos llevábamos muy bien como pareja, hasta que empezaba de drogarme. Cuando ella descubrió que yo estaba de drogarme otra vez, 'te voy a dejar' me dice, 'te voy a renunciar, te quiero mucho pero, te tienes que curar, tienes que curar, tienes que curar', pero...parecía que no pude detenerme. La adición a la piedra, nunca conocí otro tipo de droga, irónicamente antes nunca consumí drogas, y fui a conocer la que mas adictiva es en donde yo sé."*  
 Joan: *"Si, si."*
- 6 Ernesto: *"Cuando esta, dejaba yo de drogarme empezaba un batalla aquí adentro... una lata, y pensaba en ese lata pude hacer una pipa,...Ganaba dinero y pensaba cuanto me alcanzaba, trataba de quitarme de esas ideas pero es un pelea, una pelea por dentro.... finalmente, perdi ese pelea por presiones, o por excusas, buscamos un pretexto un excusa."*  
 Joan: *"Huhu"*
- 7 Ernesto: *"Empecé de drogarme nuevamente intenté, incluso de separarme de ella, y ella no me dejaba ir en este lado, me ..., o me amenazaba mas fuerte con cuchillo, así al cuello: 'si te vas me mato'."*
- 8 *Con o sin drogas no soy violento, detesto la violencia por lo mismo porque crecí en este circulo, con mucho violencia mucho maltrato. Pero, pero, estaba drogada y no la queria ver sufrir.*
- 9 Ernesto: *"... hasta que terminamos los dos sentado en el piso del baño, yo querría abrasarle y ella se golpeo, y me dijo ya no puedo vivir asi, yo no lo vas dejar, yo no sé que hacer para ayudarte, yo no voy a dejarte, pero no puedo seguir viviendo así" " entonces ella me tomo los manos ... en su cuello y me dijo 'hazlo, hazlo porque asi es mas facil' y lo hice, (silencio), lo hice ...7 meses ..., 7 meses."*
- 10 *Matiz is nuance, shade of meaning.*

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