Accessing prisons

Access is a central theme of any research that involves prisons. It is clearly a central theme for a study of the encounter between NGOs and prisons. In this chapter we begin our comparison of the different styles of encounter between NGOs and prisons by looking at what we call ‘first encounters’ – that is, at the foundation for encounters and the form encounters take during entry procedures, as well as at the mark these encounters leave (cf. Sloan and Drake 2013). We look at different types of access arrangements in the three countries and observe the way the NGOs negotiate access, both in advance of actual encounters and face to face.

In the first section we consider the foundations of access, be these formal legal agreements, memorandums of understanding, or goodwill-based arrangements. Then we describe entry procedures in each country, exploring the different challenges and styles of navigation utilised by the NGOs. The descriptions teach us about the prisons that are being entered and the organisations that are entering them as well as offering crucial insights into the encounters themselves. It is during these points of contact that personal and institutional subjectivities are first, often quite potently, being formed.

In a final section we take our descriptions of entry procedures as a point of departure for discussing the emotional impact of the prison. Encounters with prisons are not stress-free, and co-researchers’ experiences at the gate on their way into prisons highlight some of the ways in which the prison leaves its mark. The variation in degrees of emotional labour called for by first and oft repeated encounters reveals further differences and similarities between countries and between NGOs.
Getting into prison is as difficult for some as getting out of prison is for others. The prison authorities, in general, and individual prison staff, in particular, typically stand between the NGO representatives and the inside of the prison and its occupants. Access is thus a fundamental feature of the NGOs’ regular business with the prison. The research access literature emphasises the inaccessibility and impenetrability of prisons (Rowe 2014, 466) as well as their tendency to be opaque, to mystify and obfuscate (Rhodes 2001, 71). This chapter is not about access from a research methodology point of view, though there are, of course, some common features in the challenges facing researchers and NGOs when it comes to accessing prisons. As we will see, the NGOs experienced both structural and relational challenges to access. Access had to be constantly fought for. Nevertheless, the regular presence of NGOs in prisons actually gave them a rather unique vantage point from which to understand the prison. As we suggested in the previous chapter, it is this vantage point that we sought to exploit in this project. In contrast to the encounter between an individual researcher and a prison, we emphasise that these are institutional encounters, often over a long time span.

A recurrent theme of this chapter around which the articulation of differences between encounters in the three countries will be framed is the notion of the familiar face. Familiarity is about recognising and being recognised, and it is linked to knowing and being known. This chapter unfolds how the varying degrees of familiarity between the NGOs and prisons affect the style of their encounters.

**Grounds for access**

Entering the prison is one of the events most regularly documented by co-researchers in all three countries. It is at the gate that the prison is first encountered. However, before one heads for the gate of the prison, a permit to enter must be obtained. The permits for the three NGOs differ in form, content, and issuing authority, creating slightly different mandates and scopes of operation. These permits set the formal frame for the relationship between the NGOs and prisons. How hard or easy it is to acquire a permit varies from country to country and, as we shall learn, the permits feature various degrees of elasticity.

**The Philippines**

When describing access procedures, the co-researchers from Balay focus on the bureaucratic procedures involved with obtaining permits. They experienced considerable obstacles in their quest to obtain permits for