

Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández
Cristina Del-Real
Lorena Molnar *Editors*

Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security Studies

Methods, Ethics, and Emotions

 Springer

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Foreword

Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security Studies: Methods, Ethics, and Emotions, edited by Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández, Cristina Del-Real, and Lorena Molnar, is an essential read for students and researchers interested in conducting sensitive research in criminology and security studies. The process of conducting empirical research in criminology as well as security-related topics is filled with numerous challenges and risks, especially when studying hidden, vulnerable, violent, and powerful individuals and groups, both online and offline. This book sheds light on these challenges and risks, providing valuable insights for readers.

The book offers a wealth of examples on how to approach sensitive research in criminology and security studies. Particularly noteworthy is the “lessons learned” section in each chapter, where readers can vividly understand what it is like to embark on such research in difficult situations. These valuable lessons and insights are often absent from the existing literature, leaving novice researchers unprepared for the obstacles they may face in these disciplines. The contributors of this book openly discuss dilemmas, imperfections, and how they overcame challenges, acknowledging that social research is far from flawless. Their shared experiences are immensely valuable to readers.

The editors state that their aim was to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of fieldwork experiences; foster understanding, reflection, and growth within the research community; and provide guidance and inspiration to early career researchers. In accomplishing these goals, the book contributes significantly to the advancement of criminology and security studies.

The book’s origins lie in the collaborative efforts of the three editors over several years, along with extensive interactions with researchers who eventually contributed their chapters. This collaboration resulted in contributions from 55 authors representing 40 universities and research institutions across 13 countries. Although the book focuses on sensitive research in criminology and security studies, it features authors from other social science disciplines like anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

The included chapters illustrate both shared elements and unique aspects among various research projects. From these chapters, readers can glean the following requirements for engaging in sensitive research in criminology and security studies:

- Thorough field preparation
- Careful consideration of participant recruitment methods, data collection locations, and techniques
- Ethical and moral consideration
- Assessment of risks and potential harm to both participants and researchers
- Appropriate exit strategies from the field

The discussions and examples presented in this book hold immense value for students and researchers, not only in criminology but also in other social science disciplines. I highly recommend this book, especially to novice researchers, as it imparts extensive knowledge on conducting research ethically and morally in extremely challenging environments while prioritizing emotional well-being and safety.

Pranee Liamputtong
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Introduction

During the course of preparing this book, numerous experiences and incidents have unfolded, exemplifying the dynamic nature of our research endeavors. These include the joyful arrival of three newborns, with two authors and an editor among the proud parents. Additionally, unforeseen challenges have arisen such as cases of COVID-19, a change of university, the illness of a family member, and an unexpected surgical intervention, demanding our attention and resilience. Furthermore, daunting tasks imposed by governmental bodies, coupled with newfound research and teaching responsibilities, have added further complexity to the project. Since the confirmation of Springer Nature's interest in this endeavor in May 2021, a dedicated team of 55 researchers (36 women and 19 men) has diligently contributed their expertise. However, the multifaceted nature of our experiences has necessitated several adjustments to accommodate these real-life incidents. Throughout this process, we engaged in shared reflections, collectively strategizing on how to approach the different sections, epitomizing our commitment to presenting an authentic portrayal of our fieldwork. These genuine accounts and the subsequent adaptations are of utmost importance to us, as they encapsulate the essence of this book.

The invaluable lessons and insights scientists have acquired throughout the research journey, as well as the profound impact of their experiences, often remain absent from the published works. The limitations imposed by articles of 6000–8000 words hinder the scientific community from conveying the full scope of what they have encountered, how researchers navigated through challenges, and how these circumstances influenced their research. These constraints prevent all of us from sharing both successes and mistakes, from acknowledging instances of inadequate foresight or poorly conceived steps, as well as recounting the triumphs resulting from well-considered strategies, extensive preparations, strokes of luck, and swift decisions made in unforeseeable situations. Consequently, we inadvertently project an image to the scientific community, and even to ourselves, that from the research design to the publication of results, everything meticulously adhered to the proposed roadmap, and that we, as researchers, are detached automatons meticulously collecting data with robotic neutrality. The latter has detrimental effects on the scientific enterprise and those involved in it such as depriving fellow researchers of the

opportunity to learn from the debates, challenges, and alternative approaches encountered by others. This impact is particularly pernicious for early career researchers, who may lack exposure to normalized processes and the chance to glean insights from the experiences of their peers.

The genesis of this collaborative book stems from extensive discussions held by the three editors over the course of several years, as well as numerous interactions with esteemed colleagues, many of them authors of the chapters composing this work. These conversations have taken place in informal settings, as well as within the ethical committees of our universities, and have emerged during conferences and scientific gatherings where anecdotes and experiences from our collective fieldwork have been shared. These exchanges have encompassed a wide spectrum of emotions, ranging from amusing and even hilarious accounts when viewed in retrospect, to deeply concerning and potentially research-jeopardizing situations. These personal accounts were shared in informal settings, serving as a means of decompression among peers who can truly comprehend the profound anguish experienced when facing situations such as engaging in interviews with terrorists, venturing into paramilitary zones for the first time, grappling with the uncertainty of how to prevent revictimization during a study, procuring a valid sample without prior knowledge of inmate characteristics, or persuading the IT managers of our university to authorize the installation of software on their servers for a study on the digital footprint of hackers. These shared confidences capture the essence of the human experiences intertwined with our research endeavors, highlighting the complexities and challenges we encounter in our fieldwork. By unearthing and documenting these moments, we hope to shed light on the intricate and often overlooked aspects of research, providing our peers with a deeper understanding of the multifaceted reality we navigate. Through the candid exploration of our collective experiences, we aim to foster empathy, provoke thoughtful discussions, and ultimately contribute to the growth and improvement of our scientific community.

The essence of our project, encapsulated in the title “Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security Studies: Methods, Ethics, and Emotions,” aimed to delve into the personal encounters and challenges researchers face in their pursuit of scientific knowledge. Unlike existing publications on research techniques and methods, our focus was specifically on the intricacies of fieldwork experiences. Our project revolved around three core elements: methods, ethics, and emotions. In exploring methods, we sought to uncover how researchers navigated the investigation of sensitive subjects and concealed collectives, adapting established techniques or developing new methodologies for areas such as cyber research. Ethics played a crucial role as we examined the guidance provided by universities, ethical dilemmas encountered, and the measures taken to protect both researchers and participants. We addressed not only confidentiality but also re-victimization prevention and the potential stigmatization of groups resulting from research findings. Recognizing the significance of emotions, often overlooked in publications on sensitive topics, we acknowledged their intrinsic role. Convincing some authors to embrace the inclusion of emotions in their chapters required discussions and clarification of the importance of acknowledging our own subjectivity in the field. While objectivity

remains vital, we cannot dismiss the emotional experiences inherent in our work. Sharing strategies for managing and navigating emotions was particularly valuable for early career researchers. Ultimately, our project aimed to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of fieldwork experiences. Through an exploration of methods, ethics, and emotions, we sought to foster understanding, reflection, and growth within the research community. By providing guidance and inspiration to early career researchers embarking on their scholarly quests, we aimed to contribute to the advancement of criminology and security studies.

The final map of contributors represents 40 universities and research centers from 13 countries: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The process of selecting authors for this collective project was itself a valuable learning experience. Our goal was to achieve a balanced representation of authors by combining the experience of established experts who had shaped research dynamics over the past two decades with the fresh perspectives of early career researchers who could contribute with innovative approaches and techniques. In addition, we aimed to incorporate a wide range of disciplinary perspectives coming not only from criminologists, but also anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, political scientists, and lawyers. Moreover, we actively sought experiences from the Global South but encountered significant difficulties in this endeavor. Despite identifying researchers with relevant expertise in our desired topics, we often found that their current research centers or universities had changed. Even when attempting to focus solely on specific countries, we faced obstacles. It appeared that certain countries – including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada – had implemented robust researcher recruitment policies, resulting in many researchers from the Global South today working in universities within those countries. This reality of the research landscape is important to acknowledge, and we wish to be honest with the readers about why this specific distribution of authors, regions, and universities is present in the book. Undoubtedly, there may be other researchers from the Global South, but despite our 9 months of searching, they remained invisible to us, at least within our scope. By providing this explanation, we aim to convey the realities of the research landscape and our sincere efforts to ensure a diverse and inclusive range of perspectives in this book. We acknowledge the limitations and challenges encountered during the selection process and strive to maintain transparency with the readers about the specific composition of authors and regions represented.

The book is divided into five parts. The first one, *The Powerful*, narrates scholars' experiences of their research journeys in the realm of power and influence towards various actors who play significant roles in different spheres: intelligence services, police officers, armed forces, political elites, the Church, and probation officers. These authors exert control, maintain order, and enforce policies, each with its own distinct agenda and authority. The second part – *The Invisible* – relates to research experiences with ethnic minorities, people involved in the night and leisure industry, persons experiencing homelessness, prison inmates and sex workers, and groups that face unique struggles and vulnerabilities. The third part addresses *The*

Vulnerable, composed by juvenile victims, victims of human trafficking, and refugee women. These individuals often find themselves in precarious situations, exposed to exploitation and abuse, and these specificities pose unique research methods and dilemmas. The fourth part relates to *The Violent* addressing research experiences with participants who are engaged in terrorism, radicalization, domestic and intimate-partner violence, organized crime groups, gangs, pedophilia and child abuse, as well as respondents who suffer from psychopathy. These subjects contribute to a climate of fear and endanger the well-being of communities and researchers require specific training during their field studies. The fifth part addresses one of the latest challenges for our societies – *The Cyber* – by narrating the experiences of scholars who study cybercriminals and cybersecurity, focusing on extremism, dark markets, and cyberbullies.

The pursuit of internal coherence in this book aimed to address the sensitive issues within a manageable scope. It was understood that attempting to cover all potential sensitive topics would be unfeasible. Instead, our focus was on identifying chapters that offered elements for cross-cutting readings. For instance, although there is no dedicated chapter specifically on police elites, relevant experiences can be found by examining different chapters on political elites, probationers, cybersecurity police officers, and the military. By employing this approach, researchers can adapt the insights from these diverse chapters to their specific area of interest. A similar logic applies to chapters by Molnar, Menih, and Feixa, which provide different perspectives on street work. Furthermore, chapters exploring the realities of individuals in state-managed centers, such as Pereda, Halty, and Güerri and Martí, contribute to a thematic and cross-cutting understanding of the subject matter. Emphasis was placed on maintaining internal homogeneity despite the diversity of the chapters, and the authors' commitment to the proposed structural approach is reflected in the rigorousness of their contributions and the resulting conclusions.

As our conversations with the authors progressed, we discovered an additional objective of the book that was not initially apparent. It became evident that not all universities possess research ethics committees to which research proposals can be submitted. Furthermore, even in cases where such committees exist, they may lack in-depth knowledge of the specific sensitive and hard-to-reach topics and populations addressed in our work, or their evaluation criteria may be inconsistent. This inconsistency can be observed not only within a single university but also among different universities within the same country. In light of these challenges, we firmly believe that the wealth of experiences, approaches, and decisions compiled in this book can serve as a valuable resource for researchers. It can provide them with compelling arguments to support their methodological and ethical choices when engaging with ethics committees, especially regarding topics that may not align with the expertise or consistent criteria of their own institution.

For those scholars operating in the absence of such committees, the book offers a catalog of experiences and options utilized by fellow researchers from various countries, enabling them to shape their fieldwork with due consideration for ethics and emotional well-being. By sharing the diverse array of approaches and decisions made by researchers in different contexts, we aim to empower the scientific

community to make informed choices when confronted with methodological and ethical challenges. This compilation of experiences can contribute to a more robust and globally informed discourse on research ethics, bridging the gaps that may exist between institutions and between countries. Ultimately, we aspire to promote a more cohesive and ethical research environment where researchers can engage in fieldwork while adhering to universally recognized principles of scientific integrity.

Professor Pranee Liamputtong was chosen to write the foreword due to her extensive research experience and expertise in the evolving landscape of ethics committees and research techniques. As a qualitative methodology specialist focusing on vulnerable populations, she brought valuable insights to scholars from various disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences. We express our sincere appreciation for Professor Liamputtong's prompt and positive response to the book project. Furthermore, we extend our gratitude to Springer Nature and their editors and staff we have worked with for their support and professionalism throughout the 2-year collaboration. We express our heartfelt gratitude to all the authors for their remarkable honesty and willingness to engage in extensive discussions, emails, and video calls. These exchanges were aimed at effectively conveying their experiences, including their mistakes and achievements, within the intricate realm of criminology and security studies. Recognizing the emotional toll that researching marginalized groups, vulnerable populations, or individuals involved in abhorrent actions can have is a brave act and we deeply appreciate their introspection. Their dedication to reviewing their field journals and their genuine commitment to sharing their authentic research experiences with fellow scholars in the field of criminology and security studies is truly commendable.

To sum up, the scientific research – especially in social sciences – is far from flawless. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that acknowledging imperfections, identifying areas for improvement, and striving to progress are crucial endeavors. By recognizing and sharing the realities of our research journeys, we can foster a culture of learning and growing within the scientific community. It is imperative that we collectively embrace that the pursuit of knowledge is an evolving and iterative process, one that thrives on transparency, openness, and the collective wisdom derived from shared experiences. By openly and honestly sharing their methods, dilemmas, and findings, the authors have contributed to the advancement of knowledge and the improvement of research practices in these complex domains. Their insights will undoubtedly benefit current and future researchers, providing them with valuable guidance and a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved in studying such challenging subjects in criminology and security studies.

Cadiz, Spain
The Hague, The Netherlands
Lausanne, Switzerland
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Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández
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Roderic Broadhurst holds the position of Emeritus Professor at the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) and serves as a Fellow at the Research School of Asian and the Pacific, Australian National University (ANU). With a career spanning over 45 years, he has gained extensive experience as both a practitioner and a researcher in the field of criminal justice. His diverse expertise includes working in prisons, addressing public health issues in remote areas, studying organized crime, conducting homicide investigations, and researching cybercrime. Throughout his career, Broadhurst has maintained a deep commitment to reducing re-offending risks and rehabilitating offenders through the principles of restorative justice. He currently leads the ANU Cybercrime Observatory and has taught courses on subjects such as crime theory, cybercrime, and violence.

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Part I
The Powerful

Chapter 1

Talking with Spies: From Naïve to Distrustful Researcher



Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández 

1 Intelligence Services as Research Object

At the end of 1998, I commenced my doctoral thesis on the Spanish intelligence services at the University of Barcelona, Spain, although all the fieldwork took place in Madrid at a recently established hybrid university institute somewhere between the National University of Distance Education and the Ministry of Defence: the *Instituto Universitario 'General Gutiérrez Mellado'*. The aim of my doctoral thesis was to describe the model of the intelligence services that Spain had adopted after its transition to democracy in 1978, the political and bureaucratic dynamics underlying that model, and the similarities of the Spanish model with respect to other Western ones. Since that initial study, most of my academic career has been centred on intelligence services, branching out to particular research areas on especially sensitive topics.

Oral sources of information have always played a major role in my research, due to the fact that other sources that are extensively used in other research fields, such as governmental reports, statistics, and archives, are inaccessible to the general public and hardly ever disclosed in Spain in view of the legal restrictions of the Law on Official Secrets of 1968, and its development in Law 48/1978, of 7 October. Over the years, I have conversed with former members of the intelligence services from the 1970s and 1980s who claim to have held onto internal documents, either as a protective measure or as part of a somewhat relaxed security culture that prevailed after the democratic transition. In any case, aware of its fragmented and individualistic features, I have never asked for access to that sort of material. However, I have been involved in some attempts to declassify blocks of confidential material, only released after protracted and wearisome administrative procedures.

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Although members of the intelligence services might in the first instance appear to be the most obvious research participants, this domain can only be understood with the inputs that other actors can offer, such as prime ministers and parliamentarians, members of law enforcement and military information services, journalists, and diplomats. All these actors represent the multiple mirror-like facets of a polyhedral cube and should never be dismissed. Nonetheless, the overall relevance of oral sources to intelligence studies should be placed in perspective. According to a systematic review of all research articles published between 1986 and 2016 in *Intelligence and National Security* – the flagship intelligence studies journal – researchers specialized in intelligence and national security studies conducted and referred to interviews in a mere 15% of all publications (Van Puyvelde, 2018).

Interviews aside, it is quite unimaginable for researchers to be given access to the premises of the intelligence services for observation, to conduct surveys there, or merely to gather information on working life (Hammond, 2015). There are nonetheless some very rare examples (Johnston, 2005; Cremades, 2021) where such arrangements have worked: intelligence services, for example, have commissioned research and invited teachers or guest researchers to access the service indirectly via intelligence institutes. In my case, after years of trustful cooperative relations with the Spanish intelligence services, I am perfectly unaware of the location of the *Centro Nacional de Inteligencia* (CNI) [National Intelligence Centre] canteen, if indeed they even have one, because of the physical restrictions on any movements when visiting its headquarters.

The focus of this chapter, the study of the intelligence services, quite rightly reflects the contributions of intelligence officers and associated agencies. I will not refer to my own experiences with political elites and other such sources, as that topic is better covered in other branches of the scientific literature. Most of my interviewees have been male, military personnel, retired from active service in the intelligence agencies, although the thoughts of both male and female civilians have been reflected in my studies, since completing my Ph.D. dissertation in 2003, as a consequence of the evolving human resources profile of the Spanish intelligence services. These individuals fall into the category of hard-to-reach populations. Researching people whose identities are often unknown and, even when known, are forbidden to discuss their work with outsiders, presents many difficulties. The scientific research methods within this field, therefore, require some adaptations that are detailed in the following section.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

2.1 Accessing the Fieldwork

Intelligence agencies are uncharted territory, whose staff have blurred faces and whose facilities have doors with neither doorbells, knockers, nor doorknobs. Knocking on that sort of door is extremely challenging. Identifying the beginning of

a potentially informative thread is time consuming, and the very few available sources mean that potentially useful gatekeepers are difficult to identify. The limited number of available sources, added to their invisibility, is the main difficulty when documenting and designing a fieldwork strategy to access those threads. In my initial research, I knocked at two doors: one formal and another informal. The formal door consisted in contacting the Spanish intelligence services to share details on my proposal for a doctoral thesis and to invite their collaboration. After some phone calls made by the director of the University Institute, at the end of 1998, I received a green light to send a letter to the director of the *Centro Superior de Información de la Defensa* (CESID) [Higher Centre for Defence Intelligence] – at that time the name of the Spanish intelligence services – later renamed the CNI in 2002.

Following various negotiations, moderated via a prestigious Army general, an interview at the CESID headquarters in Madrid was arranged where they asked me for a copy of my doctoral project – that I had sensibly slipped into my briefcase – and for over 2 hours an intelligence officer succinctly responded to a long list of questions. I never heard anything back from CESID until years later. Some high-ranking Armed Forces officials had made calls on my behalf to move the process on; however, all their conversations came to nothing. It was crystal clear that I was on their radar and that they held little or no interest in cooperating with my research project. In formal organizations, collaboration can be prohibited between personnel and outsiders (Dingwall & Strong, 1985; Wadds, 2022), and I wanted to avoid being vetoed and gaining a reputation as an unreliable and bothersome researcher. Although fruitless, this first formal approach was necessary to pre-empt any subsequent criticism, i.e. that CESID could justify a decision not to cooperate with my study, due to my having rushed into the field without having consulted them first.

Formal access having failed, I focused on informal access to the world of spying. I also discovered that some well-known social research *personae*, such as the *informant* and the *gatekeeper*, also existed in the intelligence world. As in other domains, despite the sound design of an investigation, successful access is still a question of being in the right place at the right time, which implies a certain degree of good luck and fortuitousness (Sarsby, 1984). In my personal experience, I had that sort of good fortune with my three main gatekeepers: a former minister of Defence, a Navy officer and former CESID member in the 1980s, and a journalist specializing in security and defence. However, it is to be noted that the first contacts to come forward in fieldwork may often be marginalized or dissatisfied members within an organization and should be rejected; otherwise, the research risks being skewed, and the researcher may even be considered supportive of the most deviant members under scrutiny. Fortunately, this was not my case, but I cannot trivialize the risks of welcoming absolutely anyone with open arms who promises to unlock the gate because of my own personal frustrations of months and months of work to no avail.

Seen with some perspective, my introductory contacts were the hotchpotch of the three characteristics that, in his influential work, Lee (1993) attributed to key informants and gatekeepers. In the first place, they were the *bridge* that allowed me to overcome the very often invisible ditch that separates the group from the milieu, in my case, a young civilian from the south of Spain at the University of Barcelona

conducting research at a Ministry of Defence building in Madrid. Arriving at the Institute, it was a marvellous day whenever a note or an email with a suggested contact lay on my desk: ‘Telephone 91-398952, he is expecting your call’, which allowed me to cross the river towards the other side of ‘spy town’. The informants and gatekeepers also acted as *guides*, facilitating a certain freedom of movement within the group by indicating to me what to do in some circumstances, what type of questions to ask, and even to avoid embarrassing situations by sketching out the customs, taboos, and internal dynamics of the group. Comments such as ‘have you already spoken with...?’, ‘When you speak with X, remember to ask him about Y, he’ll understand’, or ‘Don’t even dream of going out for lunch at a military club without wearing a jacket, will you?’ were not at all uncommon. Finally, there were the *guardians* who offered their protection, in my case, knowing that I was under the academic umbrella of a former Defence Ministry, and warning me: ‘You know who X really is now, don’t you? Be careful with him’.

Another way of gaining informal access to the field has been attendance at conferences, seminars, and forums at which the presence of military personnel, diplomats, and security personnel is plentiful. It implies being continually on the lookout for whoever might be or might have been working or in contact with the Spanish intelligence services, handing out visiting cards, and sending out feelers on work underway, which was I suppose tiring and repetitive for some people. Smiling kindly, one of the frequent attendants to those forums asked ‘Hey, son, still selling your thing?’. Slowly, people started to appear who ‘might know someone, who perhaps knew someone, who might have worked for the intelligence service’. Gradually more doors opened and more potential informants appeared. More recently, social media platforms – mainly Twitter and LinkedIn – have opened up new gateways for accessing former members of the intelligence services who had either retired or left the service for the private sector – as also referred by Cremades (2021) in his Ph.D. dissertation on the Colombian intelligence services. Communication channels that I have hardly used and if so, mainly to stay in touch and to keep communication channels open.

Although secret and hidden from the outside, internal intelligence service members maintain close ties of camaraderie between each other. As an example, a leading director of the service during the years of the transition to democracy and whom I was at a loss to find for years reproached me when I identified him at a conference: ‘Good Lord, you’ve already spoken to all my promotion before me; I thought you weren’t interested in me! Come home and we’ll talk, whenever you want’, which confirmed that good – and also bad – reputations can run rife. The response that I received from the other end of the telephone of an ex-senior CESID manager also serves as an example. After having merely told him my name, he said, ‘Hallo, young man, how is your thesis going?’, which I interpreted as an ostentatious way of demonstrating that he knew perfectly well who I was.

So much time preparing ways of accessing these participants might be considered futile and the best way could indeed be to try direct contact and cold calling. However, I must say that most of my ‘failed interviews’, i.e. those in which I could not obtain any relevant information or in which the cooperative attitude of the

interviewee was stifled, were precisely those in which my strategy was not sufficiently case-specific or the relationship between the intermediary and the interviewee was not sufficiently deep. In that regard, I learned – a posteriori, from my own mistakes – that access must be carefully planned, key informants identified and used whenever possible, and reputation maintained intact, as invisible ties connected the group to the eyes of outsiders.

2.2 *Data-Collection Technique: Interviews*

As summarized by Van Puyvelde (2018), the traditional approach in intelligence studies towards interviewing has been, first of all, the *positivist* one, serving the interviewers to help fill in the information gaps left by publicly available documentary sources. From this perspective, interviewing insiders can enrich and sometimes contrast the government narrative recounted through archival sources and other public documents. The second approach is the *constructivist* one, where interviewers coproduce data with their interviewees and not merely to glean information from them. Observing my whole research career, my use of oral sources could mainly be explained as a positivistic approach, seeing my interviewees as data providers, in the absence of other sources, such as archives or official documents. Nonetheless, semi-structured interviews leave room for cosmovision to emerge and motivations that are more identifiable with a constructivist approach, as I was indeed trying to give meaning to such questions as the evolution of the Spanish intelligence services following the end of the dictatorship under Francisco Franco (Díaz-Fernández, 2005) and the role of the Spanish intelligence community in the decision-making process (Díaz-Fernández, 2010).

Sampling, recruitment, and interviewing schedules must be clearly aligned with the research question(s) and with the utility we expect from the available types of oral sources. However, beyond any ideal strategy that we might have in mind, we must also consider that availability, convenience, and chance in the field of intelligence can often affect the order in which interviewees will recount their stories (Van Puyvelde, 2018). The main sampling method I used was snowball (non-probability) sampling. It is based on the assumption that a link or a connection exists between the initial sample and others within the population that is under study, thereby building up a series of reference units within a known circle of contacts (Khoury, 2020). Hence, at the end of my interviews, I would usually make the following sorts of requests: ‘Could you put me into contact with the person that you mentioned during the interview?’ or ‘Do you know someone who might be of interest in this study?’. Some interviewees rapidly dismissed some of those requests, but others kept them in mind until, for example, a circle of officers met up for lunch or ran into each other by chance. Patience and optimism are, therefore, important qualities to develop in this field: even though the researcher might sometimes perhaps feel blocked, one never knows when another informant will emerge.

One critique often directed at snowball sampling is linked to the selection of participants and, especially, the connections between them, which can lead to a biased sample and can, therefore, render the research invalid and unreliable. However, although it is a subjective perception, I have never noted any such bias within a specific network of participants. Obviously, this perception may be likened to the tip of an iceberg, at first sight perhaps thought to be floating upon the sea even though 10% is only ever visible. It may perhaps be due to my approach that was focused on the intelligence services as an organization, so I never pursued personal narratives (i.e. interest in joining the service, family life, risk perception...) where I might potentially have faced a wider variety of realities. In 2012, a group of former members of the Spanish Intelligence Services created an association to stay in contact and to participate in some outreach activities: *Asociación de Ex-Miembros del Servicio de Inteligencia Español* [Association of Ex-Members of the Spanish Intelligence Service] with some of whose members I am still in touch. Its membership of approximately 110 ex-members shows greater interest in sharing some of their experiences and participating in publications, round tables, and TV programmes. It is another niche that can serve as the start of a new thread or to canvass for new informants. Although some of the members with whom I am personally acquainted share a more open view of their work and relationship with society, my perception is that they cover a wide variety in terms of ideology and life experiences.

Sampling is one of the key themes where the size of the group is unknown. A quick look at research published on the topic reveals a wide variety of characteristics and samples sizes, from Riste (1999) on a historical approach to the Norwegian intelligence services to Perry (2021), in his research on the motivations of spies to become involved in espionage, and the 42 participants in Eickelman's (1988) study, to ten in the study of Ratcliff (2006), and around 400 in the study of Johnson (1996). But if we go beyond the figures, we see that the 42 oral sources of Eickelman in his study of the intelligence service of Oman, before that country gained its independence, supposedly represented 89% of the members of the service: an unquestionable success. Considering the size of the potential universe, the number of interviewees, although reduced, can be considered very relevant. Gill (2000) interviewed 70 elite members of the police information service and O'Brien (2011), in his doctoral thesis on the South African intelligence services, interviewed around 20 officers in charge of national security during the days of apartheid.

The size of the sample is directly linked to the research question. Unlike in the first few years when each interview was as a desert oasis, it was increasingly easy later on to enter into contact with the 'hidden dimension' of the State. The decision over when to end fieldwork has, therefore, become more difficult, as new snippets of information and new sources have emerged with greater frequency. Throughout the years, this final stage has always been marked by the well-known 'saturation point' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): when (i) it seems that no new or relevant data are going to appear in relation to that category; (ii) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, demonstrating variation; and (iii) the relationship between categories is well established and validated. Therefore, the

collection strategy – and here the size and composition of the sample are included – must be clearly aligned with our research question.

Regarding the order in which the interviews were conducted, most of my research has been rooted in interviews with intelligence officers, before moving on towards the spheres of political and managerial influence, in order to check my findings and to test my hypotheses. I must admit that young operative agents have never been the principal target of my research. Firstly because, for obvious reasons, they have a narrower vision of intelligence agency activities and, secondly, their more limited willingness to cooperate with researchers, as I have observed, diminishes with age as the agents become more flexible in terms of the information that they are willing to share with the researcher. Nonetheless, every source has its value, and younger members and those with fewer responsibilities in the service are also interesting sources that can bring new insights to the attention of the researcher for further exploration. The research strategy must, therefore, be based on accepting the different types and the depth of the information that each available source can provide; something that is obvious in the field where the activity is so heavily compartmentalized and where sources cannot provide information they do not hold.

Researchers could employ the *triangulation* method – i.e. cross-referencing the information obtained via different sources – to interpret the data, due to the scarcity and the fragmentation of the available information (Hammond, 2015), to overcome the barriers of compartmentalization, lack of information, and fragmentation of knowledge. In my personal experience, I have used triangulation on a threefold basis. Firstly, asking the oral sources about the content of some documents, and, secondly, asking the same questions to members of different groups – agents, medium-level managers, and executives – although assuming that they hold a different vision of the topic according to the place they occupy in the organization. I by chance experienced a very particular, rare, and unexpected situation of ‘triangulation’ some two decades ago. An operative agent vividly recounted a bizarre operation to me that had taken place in Morocco where he had been working alongside a second Spanish spy. More recently, chasing up the comments of a former spy at a conference, I was curious and questioned him in private: ‘I think I know who your peer was during that operation: he was X, wasn’t he?’ The individual admitted having accompanied the second spy during that mission, and no other single detail came out of his mouth. His polite, yet extraordinarily succinct explanation taught me two lessons: (i) that operation was exactly how it was described two decades ago by the first agent and (ii) the different characters of spies and the degree of reserve that they can hold towards past operations.

2.3 *Gaining and Keeping my Credentials*

My key informants and my own smooth walk into the fieldwork – perhaps only possible within the framework provided by a four-year Ph.D. grant – were sufficient to gain some credentials. The latter is critical, as access is achieved not so much

because of what is explained, but by how the researcher behaves in front of the gatekeepers and key informants (Wax, 1985). Since first starting my fieldwork, I have strictly adhered to some basic rules, thoughtfully established in the first months of the research, in order to gain and, of course, to keep the necessary credentials. Firstly, research objectives – as Peritore (1990) advised – must always be presented with the greatest possible clarity and transparency knowing, moreover, how misleading the intelligence world can be and, more specifically, considering the scandals of political espionage in which CESID was embroiled in the year I began my doctoral project (1998). Secondly, I emphasized my academic affiliation and the seriousness of my work: I was preparing a Ph.D. dissertation, so I could never be confused with a snooping investigative journalist. I always carried my visiting cards bearing the logotype of the institution with which I was affiliated at the time, to emphasize the scientific character of my work (Williams et al., 1992). And thirdly, I decided to never ask about topics that lay outside the object of the investigation, even though the interviewees may have raised them. As Feldman (1991, p. 12) also underlined, I too made it clear to my interviewees that ‘there were things, places and people that I did not want to see’.

I was following these rules so strictly that it was sometimes shocking for some interviewees. This was, among others, the case of the director of the *Organización Contrasubversiva Nacional de Franco* [National Countersubversive Organization of Franco] (1968–72). Reaching out to him took almost 2 years and four intermediaries before I was guaranteed a meeting. It may be noted that he was convicted for participating in the attempted *coup d'état* of 1981 and was released from prison in 1986. After some smooth interviews with him, in reaction to my never having asked him about his prominent involvement – as this was not part of my dissertation – he interjected: ‘Shall I tell you about the coup?’, to which I evidently responded in the affirmative as an expression of empathy and rapport.

Part of this reluctance to break these rules was based on my permanent suspicion that some interviewees were sending probes to check my reliability and to find out whether I was really interested in the Spanish intelligence model or whether that was an excuse for another type of work. In that sense, I always doubted whether the initial questions of some of the interviewees were simply asked out of curiosity or whether they were testing my trustfulness. Those questions were – and still are – somewhat scary as they are usually very short, straightforward, and punctilious with little room for escape clauses: ‘Who else have you talked to?’ or ‘What have the others told you?’ They sometimes even attempted to glean my opinions with questions like: ‘You’ve been investigating the matter for some time, what are your conclusions?’, all of which even before the proper beginning of the interview. It was always clear that revealing some of this information implied breaking the commitment to both the anonymity and the confidentiality that I had only just a few minutes ago guaranteed and, potentially, closing the door on any new interviews that they might otherwise have suggested or even ending the flow of information from an interviewee.

The truth is that a researcher has no wish to disappoint an interviewee. Therefore, among the few ways of skirting around, any inquisitive questions from an

interviewee are responses that somehow exaggerate the underlying hypothesis of the matter at hand, which have been of great utility in past interviews. It forces the interviewee to rise to the challenge and sympathetically ‘correct’ my distorted view of the matter, to put me out of my ignorance, in such a way that the interviewee is suddenly in charge of the situation. Nevertheless, these situations should hardly be ignored, as such topics, areas of interest, and casual hints that usually crop up – and not in the most politically correct manner at times – can help to contextualize the content, to open up new lines of work, and to construct alternative hypotheses (Warren et al., 2003). Over the years, personal and academic maturity has helped me to answer and to block these questions in a more direct and straightforward way, sometimes quite deftly, using humour.

2.4 *Logistics*

Where to meet up with the interviewees has never been an inconsequential topic for obvious reasons of privacy and security. In my case, I always offer the interviewees the choice of venue, which on the immense majority of occasions they choose; in any case, it is important to have an alternative in mind, so as not to appear disorganized or amateurish, in case the interviewee is unable to set the place. In my experience, over half of them prefer to meet up at a café or restaurant, and a quarter in their office. I cannot establish a precise rule on the choice of venue as cafés are chosen both by retired and active members or those who continue working for the government or the private sector. On the other hand, some of the people I have interviewed several times have on various occasions chosen different venues for the meetings. The ideal venue for an interview is, in short, wherever the interviewees feel at ease and relaxed. In the case of the intelligence officers, I draw what I call ‘Three golden rules for not bothering a spy’ as I sense that they feel more comfortable controlling the interview setting. These are (i) always let them place themselves in the furthest corner and face the door; (ii) never arrive early for the meeting, and let them be the ones waiting for me so that they could scrutinize the meeting place, and (iii) make sure not to keep any piece of paper on which they may have written or drawn during the interview.

In some cases – exclusively for high-ranking services personnel, prominent politicians, and business leaders – I was able to identify a similar pattern. On most occasions, the interview was interrupted by an assistant who entered the room recalling a recent interview or event. Over time, I interpreted those events as a pre-established escape door in case the interviewee felt uncomfortable during the interview. I am glad to say that all the interviews have always continued and even beyond the pre-established length. My perception has invariably been that the interest of these elite groups always tended to run deep, out of a desire to better understand topics of which they had direct experience, and they were pleased to express their interest in an interview with an outsider whose cross-cutting view of the topic might also give them further insight.

Most of my interviews were semi-structured; however, over the years, I have also had the opportunity to share meals, beers, trips... where very relevant information is shared for understanding the workings of the Spanish intelligence community in a less structured manner. In view of the smooth strategic approach detailed above, I am fully informed well in advance on the background of the person to be interviewed or I have, at least, the basic information such as period, area, and organization for which the interviewee worked. As greater familiarity was gained with the topic, holding unstructured interviews – although stressful – was not such a huge challenge as it was in my first years and can yield good results. The problem arises on those rare occasions where all I have is a name, making it difficult to conduct even a semblance of an interview. Many years ago, I was not even aware of who the interviewee would be. Two army colonels insisted on having lunch with a former colleague and I accompanied them in a car following a rough plan – before Google Maps was available to the general public – to a social club on the outskirts of Madrid where we had lunch with a person who, after various hours of conversation, confessed to me that he had been number two in Franco's secret service. I had references to him – to a certain 'Captain X' – in some documents and oral testimonies but imagined him to be more of a phantom than a real person until I had not only met him but also had lunch with him.

Although the telephone interview – or more recently Video Teleconferencing – increases access to potential interviewees, in my experience, neither are communications channels that my interviewees have ever shown much interest in using at all for anything other than arranging a meeting. It is linked to a very persistent doubt that my colleagues have raised with me in fieldwork – both in the past and nowadays: the possibility of recording the interviews. There are a few researchers such as Cremades (2021) who have recorded some of the interviews. However, in my case, I have never asked interviewees for permission to record the conversations assuming that sensitive information could potentially be provided and, whether or not sensitive, that the interviewee might make personal or political comments that they would prefer not to be on the record and far less so recorded.

Perhaps, the choice not to record was determined by the time when I started my Ph.D. research. In 1998, some scandals that revealed spying on King Juan Carlos I (who reigned from 1975 to 2014) and other public figures plus the use of secret funds were in the limelight. It was, therefore, not the most propitious scenario, in the midst of journalistic and legal investigations, in which to ask people whether the interviews could be recorded. That perception was confirmed by one of my first interviewees who made it quite clear with a wry smile: 'Make a recording? Depends on what you want me to tell you, old boy...' And here, my experience coincides with other researchers who recognize that although they may have permission to record, much of the richest information is obtained under the condition that they do not record certain parts or that the conversation, if recorded, may be less informative (Tunnell, 1998; Cremades, 2021). We must make a choice and strike a balance between extracting as much information and knowledge as possible without recording the interview, and working with a recorded interview and analysing literal excerpts. This approach ensures we do not rely solely on one's memory and notes, although potentially can cause us to miss collecting some relevant testimonies from the interviewer.

Suspicious over recording remained for years. Some years ago, during an interview with a member of the Defence Committee of the Spanish Parliament, I inadvertently left my agenda on his desk. At that point in the year, it was already stacked with piles of paper that appeared to camouflage a microphone or camera. His repeated glances led me to remove the agenda from the desk and return it to the backpack; I may also add that hidden-camera TV programmes had become very popular in those years. In more extreme cases, simple gestures of touching the pen in the inside pocket of my jacket have raised suspicions of activating some recording device. In recent years, with the recording capacity of smartphones, every time I start an interview, I make an ostensible act of placing it in my backpack that I purposefully leave to one side, so that at the very least the phone will not be used as a hidden recorder.

Therefore, faced with the impossibility of recording, my practice has always been to take written notes and never even ask about recording the encounter, as solid guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality are given when arranging the interview. I also learnt never to note down what is of interest to me when the interviewee was actually recounting events, but instead some time afterwards. In doing so, my aim is not to attract attention to what is of interest to me and involuntarily condition the testimony of the interviewee. It is true that I might also involuntarily have made the interviewee think that what was being said while I was taking notes was of some relevance when it might not have been. In any case, it always appeared to be a form of controlling the rhythm of the interview, although it might be worth rethinking that aspect in the future.

The mental exhaustion of the strategy of not-recording the interviews almost goes without saying. When an interview is over, I go straight away to a nearby café or park to write up the interview from my raw notes. I followed the same strategy that I also noted later on in Hoffmann (2006), who neither recorded the conversations nor took notes during the meetings, and followed a similar routine. Upon leaving, he recorded keywords to recall as much data and as many impressions as he could; with no further delay, he went home and wrote it all down to review it against what he had recorded before anything was forgotten; a process that took him – like me – between 3 and 5 hours. The overall duration of each interview also varied enormously. In my case, some of them lasted for no longer than 40 minutes and others – with lunch or dinner included – extended over 7 hours. The average, however, was between one-and-a-half and 2 hours, with a mode of 45 minutes.

2.5 The Relationship with the Participants

Most of my interviewees have always been cooperative and willing to help over the years, without placing limits on the interviews in terms of time and topics to be covered. However, that in itself is no indication that they are in the position to provide relevant and voluminous information. Intelligence officers – and I include here medium and high-ranking officers of the service – tend to have very

compartmentalized knowledge of their work within the organizational culture and the operational procedures of the intelligence services themselves are based on principles such as ‘need to know’, ‘need to be there’, and ‘need to share’. They can all be essentially summarized by the maxim: ‘what you do not know, you do not talk about’; or as an officer in South America told me: ‘The less you know the lighter the torture!’. During the interviews, almost all the interviewees coincided at some point in underlining that ‘this is my impression’ or ‘that much I do know’. I profoundly understood this feeling of compartmentalization when, after seeing my Ph.D. published by one of the largest Spanish publishers (Díaz-Fernández, 2005), a CESID head of Division confessed to me: ‘Thanks to your book I finally understood things and events that had happened to us; from inside the service, we are not able to grasp an overall view of our own organization’.

There again, elites – whether in politics or the intelligence services – are easier to locate – the latter less so – and are almost always more predisposed and willing to participate once they have left office. Despite being in a privileged position, they do not always remember everything or they may wish to convey a biased image of their political work in an area as sensitive as state intelligence. I recall no one willing to state mistruths nor blatant attempts to cover up responsibilities or the like. Only once, could I clearly detect that a person who was involved in a dirty-tricks operation was giving me very inaccurate information. In my research what I certainly did find was a ‘retrospective rationality’ (Wright & Decker, 1997). Some interviewees, at the time of telling their stories, either consciously or subconsciously transmuted what ‘was’ to confuse it with what ‘should have been’. Some tried to redirect the investigation towards different topics; however, I would explain any such diversions to the fragmented knowledge they held of each topic that was under discussion, as well as the effect of time on the clarity of memory.

Generating rapport is always essential when talking with research participants. However, it is even more necessary when interviewees are, by training or by nature, mistrustful and sceptical. Some of them are trained in lie detection and are good at masking their emotions and feelings and hiding details; they are charming and psychological seductors (Hammond, 2015), which, therefore, makes it more difficult to know whether the researcher is indeed breaking the ice or whether it is simple sophistry employed to elicit information from him. I must confess that over the years, I was very careful with my comments, and when unknown people were around, I tended to move to the role of observer and keep my mouth firmly closed. Perhaps that behaviour had no meaning at all; however, assimilating some of the routines and the behaviours of my interviewees was somehow the way that I followed as a junior researcher to approach such an intangible research object. My ‘watch and remain silent’ strategy has been even more intense with the arrival of social networks. Potential interviewees can scan your personal and political opinions, trips, and interests and, of course, have access to your whole professional curricula and thereby establish more or less your opinion and approach towards a research topic (Saltmarsh, 2013).

Very early on, my understanding was that any rapport should be based on a proper understanding of the motivations of the interviewee to collaborate in the

research. The reasons to cooperate that I have identified are as follows. In my first years, some interviewees showed a willingness to help out a young researcher. Others helped me simply because somebody had suggested an interview to them and they agreed to make a commitment. Some others, having already surpassed the sixth decade of their lives – and others close to their 80th birthday – wished to share their version of what and how certain events had taken place. The idea that it would be set down for posterity represented a degree of liberation for them. I have listened on more than one occasion to the affirmation that ‘I am going to tell the truth about what happened’. And, some others were very curious to talk with a researcher with a wider understanding of the topic, which reminded me that Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 76) defended the interviewees who ‘are more willing to talk in depth, if they conclude that you are familiar with and sympathetic to their world’. Finally, I have no recollection of any testimonies based on a wish for revenge against the intelligence services. Researchers should never be so naïve as to think that no other people in the study will be reaping some benefits from the interview.

3 Ethics, Secrets, and Protection of the Sources

None of the universities nor research centres with which I have been affiliated over the past two decades had an Ethics Research Committee, although that situation recently changed at the University of Cadiz that now has one to which I was appointed as a member and remain so at the time of writing this contribution. Over the years, the absence of these committees made it impossible for me to submit any protocol or informed consent for validation. There is no doubt that it would have been of enormous help for my first steps in research; anyway, it was precisely the lack of guidance that led me to look more closely at the ethical research challenges and the protection of my interviewees. However, the lack of any Ethics Research Committee meant that I never had to face up to certain questions that, even today, have yet to be clearly resolved in my mind.

The use of declassified information is not usually a problem. However, it is when the researcher ‘accidentally’ gains access to classified information. It can happen whenever a document has been incorrectly classified as open access in a classified file, or when a person has access to classified information that has been leaked in the media or on the Internet, or when people with access to classified documents share information, either voluntarily, by mistake, or – as happened to me more than once – to be sure if that was the information that the researcher was really interested in declassifying. At least in Spain, all citizens have the duty not to reveal any classified information they have accessed. The dilemma is what to do with the information your eyes have already seen and your brain cannot erase. I have used that information most of the time to guide the research or to question other interviewees without declaring the initial source. On other occasions, the interviewees guided me towards news on the media or towards other sources such as the memoirs of agents or politicians that, knowledgeable of its reliability, could be quoted. Without a doubt, quite

a lot of content gathered throughout the investigation is lost, but the protection of sources comes at a cost and not revealing classified information to which one may have had access is a priority.

The second dilemma comes with the oral sources. Obtaining information from politicians, diplomats, and journalists hardly represents a major problem as the information they hold could be sensitive, but it is only classified information on rare occasions. However, information that intelligence officers share is a much more complicated situation, as they have a legal obligation not to disclose any information to which they have access during their career at the agency. I refer to my experience based on the Spanish legislation that represents the complexity of this issue quite well. The 2013 *Estatuto del personal del Centro Nacional de Inteligencia* [Articles of Incorporation of National Intelligence Centre Personnel] is crystal clear in article 75.1: ‘CNI personnel will be obliged to maintain professional secrecy with regard to CNI activities, its organization, and internal structure, resources, and procedures, personnel, installations, bases and data centres, information sources, and with regard to information or data that can lead to knowledge of the earlier material, in accordance with their classification as secret under article 5.1 of Law 11/2002 of 6 May, in regulation of the CNI, and information on the existence and the content of documents, identities, objects, and elements related with the above points, of which they may be aware. They will neither disclose this information, nor communicate it to anyone, nor keep it in their power on any media other than under the circumstances established in the legislation in regulation of Official Secrets’. Article 75.2 reads as follows: ‘Likewise, CNI personnel will abide by the duty of confidentiality and professional secrecy with regard to those facts or information that are unclassified of which they may have learnt in the course of their duties or by reason of their position, without making use of the information for personal benefit or for the benefit of third-parties, or in detriment to the public interest’.

In turn, the Spanish Criminal Code, under article 598, points out that prison sentences will be handed down to ‘Whoever, without intending to favour a foreign power, obtains, reveals, forges or erases information legally classified as reserved or secret, related to national security or national defence, [...]’. The criminal offense, therefore, would be in ‘revealing’, which is a much more disagreeable concept than ‘using’. In this way, an intelligence official could ‘speak’ about aspects that may not necessarily imply revealing a matter that is formally classified as secret. The researcher can employ these conversations to for example, confirm a hypothesis without it implying the use of classified information or the consequent revelation by the intelligence official. A separate point is that some of the interviewee’s *motu proprio* did not consider that the use that I could make of it might endanger national security; although that is somewhat irrelevant because the interviewees cannot grant themselves the capacity or the competency to declassify documentation and, thereby, decide what is sensitive or not for national security.

In 1999, and after a few months from the start of my research fieldwork in Madrid, I began to harbour serious concerns about the information that I was obtaining from members and former members of the intelligence services. I shared my doubts with a very relevant judge of the Military Court with experience in cases of

espionage and classified information leakages. His statement was clear and calming: if I was not legally responsible for the custody of that information and that information objectively implied no risk to the national security of Spain, he would be unable to pursue a criminal case against me. As much as it helped, the pressure proved excessive for a Ph.D. candidate who might potentially face police questioning or be summoned to a Public Sector inquiry.

The following example illustrates how ‘talk’ will not necessarily imply the disclosure of classified information. I have quite a few times found myself in an almost identical situation to ‘Deep Throat’, the key informant in the Watergate scandal that brought down the Nixon presidency, which is masterfully narrated in *All the President’s Men*, filmed in 1976. With no need to go to a garage, the practice of some key informants has over the years consisted in confirming or denying the information laid before them – collected from the media, old documents, and some interviews. If they confirmed the veracity of the information, the interviewees excused themselves insofar as I already knew that information, and they were, therefore, not revealing it to me. In those cases when they considered that the information was not sufficiently accurate, they indicated as much, but without giving any further guidance, they insisted on meeting up again once I had more to show. It all took up a lot of time because looking for new leads and obtaining new sources for specific details is no simple task.

Directly connected with this legal provision is the need to ask the interviewees for their informed consent. As referred to above, talking with an intelligence officer is not directly synonymous with the disclosure of official secrets; however, a mere request to sign this document could, potentially, have administrative consequences, as the disclosure of secret information during the interview might appear rather dubious to the agency. That is the reason why I have never asked any of my interviewees to sign an informed consent form, making clear the terms of our conversation when the meeting was agreed, and that was explicitly explained at the beginning of my conversations. It could have been requested using a fake name or a code, however, in my opinion, it would not have changed the engagement that had been orally reached between the interviewees and the researcher. I cannot imagine any other purpose for signing such a document than to protect our universities from legal or ethical controversies.

Protecting the anonymity of the interviewees has always been an overriding goal of my research. The protection measures I adopt are spread through the collection, filing, and publication stages of the research. Firstly, I never recorded the interviews, thereby avoiding any risk of interviewee voices being recognized in case of non-authorized access. Secondly, I codified the names of the interviewees that were never written down in my fieldnotes and that, consequently, led me in the past to create an imaginative way of recalling whoever was behind each code; for example, they were codified by the name of a plant or tree according to a letter in their names – whether the first or the last or any other will not be disclosed here. And, thirdly, at the publication stage, I altered some data in the profile of the interviewee to forestall deductive disclosures, although without losing relevant information that could help the reader to understand the position from which that interviewee was

giving his information and statements. Needless to say, although this technique can diminish the risk of a deductive disclosure, it is not as easy as may be thought in some areas where only a few people share very specific profiles.

4 Positionality and Emotions in a World of Secrets

My positionality has evolved with the passing of time and is directly linked with my emotions and how interviewees may perceive me. Anxiety arises over insufficient access to interviewees and materials and, therefore, to relevant information. Insecurity is triggered whenever not enough is known about a complex topic and faced with a feeling that the fieldwork will never be well enough prepared, due to a lack of open sources. Likewise, scary situations when trying to complete the Ph.D. dissertation, doubts, and jokes from my colleagues and peers about my real work in Madrid: spy or researcher? Data overload when all the information gathered in each new interview appears overwhelming as names, places, and events... rain down in the words of the interviewees and where everything is always new and always unknown; bewildered and lost within a world of secrecy.

These varied emotions explain – and are explained by – how my positioning has evolved with respect to my research object: an evolution of over 25 years that began with my Ph.D. It is assumed that credentials legitimize the entry and permanence of a researcher within a particular field. However, after some time, roles and positions with respect to research changed. During the first months of my doctoral process, I was simply a junior researcher from the University of Barcelona in the academic-military environment of the General Gutiérrez Mellado University Institute of Madrid. Running on intuition – and to be honest, lacking deep knowledge – I kept my eyes and ears open but my mouth shut; good advice, confirmed in the work of Polsky (2006). Sometime later, after extensive reading and some more experience in the field of intelligence services, I moved on to the role that Lofland and Lofland (1984, p. 70) defined as the ‘non-expert’ or the strategy of the ‘man from Mars’, which is characterized by adopting the role of a novice or apprentice.

Following the ‘non-expert’ phase, I progressively and consciously adopted the role that Leverentz (2010) referred to as ‘acceptable incompetence’ to generate greater confidence and gain access to more and more detailed information. That game and the progressive changes in my positionality were made possible by my youth – starting my Ph.D. at 26 years old. However, in the analysis of Seldon and Pappworth (1983), age has effects on the level of information that interviewees may share with a researcher. Interviewees can consider that the researcher is too young to grasp a historical understanding of very distant aspects and lacks the personal context to assimilate them. That is the reason why, on occasions, I had to reiterate that my knowledge and capabilities – while throwing some data on the table – were sufficient to understand the topics about which they were talking.

However, in all honesty, with my youth and not having lived through all those events, everything almost always appeared reasonable and credible. Something that

was exemplified by a warning that an old senator whispered in my ear. Despite my naïveté, his words helped me contextualize a specific situation: ‘that pleasant old man with whom you had some refreshments only yesterday was the fearsome director of Franco’s secret service’. Otherwise, I must confess that I never felt – or at least I do not remember it as such – what is labelled as ‘ethnographic seduction’. Ethnographic seduction places the researcher in a pleasant situation; it creates a feeling that the researcher has reached a profound knowledge and understanding of both the circumstances and the interviewees, that harmony exists, and that there is a fluid and sincere exchange of information (Robben, 1996). At that time, I started feeling that my positionality was changing in the field, however I still had to gain a much clearer notion of the terrain over which I was travelling.

Clarity descended the very day I understood that I had accumulated excessive knowledge, my sources were too distant from the initial contacts of the first snowball sample, and I also knew the inner workings of the organization too well. A former highly placed civil servant of the presidency of the government drew this turning point to my attention towards the end of the year 2002. In response to the question of whether he could tell me something about *Operation Fénix* (an internal restructuring programme of CESID), he smartly answered: ‘Well, you do know a lot...! There are people who have ended face down in the Manzanares river for knowing less’. Without a doubt, it was a joke for the initiated, funny after many years, but a bit shocking when you are in your 20s. That day I understood that the interviewees saw me with different eyes and I had to accept my new positionality in the field.

Various years had passed since the start of my research on intelligence, and the transition from novice to expert researcher took place, a transposition that was by no means simple. In my case, the role of expert researcher placed me in a position too close to an insider. So close that even some colleagues and relatives doubt that I am really a university professor; but being branded by the research topic is part of the game, especially with sensitive topics (Moon, 2012). An insider is not so much a formal member of the group, but someone who shares values and culture with the population under investigation (Sherif, 2017) and, when the group considers that an insider – one of their own – is at the door, access is easier. It has affected my positionality as it brings about what Mitchell Jr. (1991) called the ‘paradox of intimacy’. There are things that I am supposed to know and that I evidently never knew nor know nowadays, but I cannot ask for elucidation, because I am almost perceived as an insider. Frequently, I am in a position to need to fill in the existing gap between my real knowledge and a new piece of information that has been disclosed, thanks to ‘my trustworthiness’.

After working for so long with people trained to deceive, to hide things, feelings, and emotions, to make another person feel amazing, in order to generate trust, and to obtain information, I have become more suspicious and that arises every time that I receive a relevant piece of information and I wonder: Why me? Why now? What is the purpose?... That suspicious character of spies can worm its way into the researcher’s own personality who will assume as a fixed starting point that not everything is as it seems. This ‘on-alert’ mode is of greater complexity when I have

had access to the family circles of some agents and have developed an intermittent relationship with them. To know personal information about their children's studies, future projects, health issues... and, at the same time, to be sure that their real names are not the ones they have been using over the past few years can be shocking. I do not question that a sincere and honest relationship can be established with some interviewees; however, effective intelligence officers will never be content merely acting as information sources as, like the confession of the scorpion to the frog in the fable, it is in their nature, at least to gather information.

5 Lessons Learnt and Methodological Perspectives

The lessons I learnt are perhaps not numerous, but they are very illustrative of how to work with intelligence officers. The first one is honesty; it is essential to keep your promises and to concentrate, so as to stay within the limits of the topics proposed to the interviewee. Spies are a highly suspicious group of individuals and moving beyond the focal point of the interview could in their mind mean that you are not a reliable researcher and that you hold a secret agenda. In such reduced groups, a bad reputation can jeopardize any future interviews, leaving your research to flounder.

Second, this topic has a potential impact on junior researchers; being in frequent and close contact with spies can transform the researcher into a distrustful person. This does not happen overnight. Those tiny but recurrent routines, tests, tics, and behaviours such as always confirming the restaurant at which to meet at the last minute, not receiving – beyond a smile – any acknowledgement of your comments, or warnings such as ‘please, do not send .pdf documents, only Word files, they are more secure’ are elements which have drop by drop – as with the Chinese water torture – undoubtedly impacted on the personality and behaviour of this researcher.

Third, triangulation must remain one of the research objectives. Although access could be granted to a sufficient sample of interviewees, the different stories that are illustrated in the documents are substantial enough to extract conclusions. Like the tip of the iceberg, 90% is hidden from our eyes; however, the tip is so visible and the part beneath the water is so hidden that we may often think that the tip is all we need to know and to understand.

The sensitive topics that are investigated lead most researchers to agree that some of the guidelines of our Ethics Research committees cannot be applied to them in full, due to their special features. Research into the intelligence services has, undoubtedly, made sense of the legal obligation to abide by the duty of secrecy. It necessarily affects the way we agree to the terms under which the interviewees participate, which may include the use of informed consent, recorded interviews, and the protection of their anonymity during the fieldwork and at the time of publishing our research.

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Chapter 2

Doing Research on, for and with Police in Canada and Switzerland: Practical and Methodological Insights



Christine Burkhardt  and Rémi Boivin 

1 Introduction

The social sciences, namely psychology, sociology, public administration and criminology, explore the police institution from various perspectives. Each discipline has its own area of expertise and provides complementary knowledge. The sociological study of the police, much older than criminology, is characterised by two streams, although the boundaries are permeable: the sociology *of* the police and the sociology *for* the police (Manning, 2005). The former studies the police as a profession and organisation, mainly questioning its functioning. While the latter, in which criminology is mainly integrated, promotes the analysis of the police for the purpose of improving and perfecting its practices and policies (Holdaway, 2019; Manning, 2005).

However, in some countries, criminology, as a social science, remains a fragile field of research and needs more recognition compared to hard sciences like forensic science or engineering, whose contributions to police practices are already well established (Weisburd & Neyroud, 2011). Nevertheless, as police science flourishes, partnerships between research and practice become increasingly common (Rojek et al., 2012b). As the links between research and practice strengthen, a third form of study is emerging—research *with* the police—in which both entities seek to work together (Rojek et al., 2012b). Whether initiated by academics, policymakers or police chiefs, scientific research on, for or with the police pursues various goals and dynamics. These strategies follow the guidance of evidence-based policing and translational criminology, where the goal is to improve police practices through

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academic research, along with more standard models of policing influenced mainly by direct experience, the application of rules and procedures and the production of justice (Kenyon et al., 2022).

This chapter draws on the authors' experience as criminologists and researchers working on policing issues in Switzerland and Canada. The aim of this contribution is to highlight specific research stages or aspects identified as crucial or sensitive based on our experiences with research conducted on, for and with the police. The first author (Burkhardt) is a Research fellow at the School of Criminal Justice of the University of Lausanne since 2014. She has been involved in several policing-related research projects, including the impact of police visibility on fear of crime. For example, she led a longitudinal study to assess whether increasing police visibility by extending foot patrols had any influence on the level of fear of crime among people living in different neighbourhoods in a middle-size city in Switzerland (Burkhardt, [forthcoming](#)). The second author (Boivin) is Associate Professor at the School of Criminology of the Université de Montréal since 2012; prior to his academic career, he was a strategic advisor at the Montreal Police Services for almost five years. He has collaborated with police organisations on many projects, including the body-worn camera project that is discussed in this chapter and an on-going longitudinal study of police careers.

This chapter is structured into five parts. After a brief introduction to criminological research in the police environment, different ways of understanding a partnership between practice and research are discussed. Access to the field is then addressed, focusing on requests for permission and the social acceptance of the researcher. Following an overview of the methods commonly used in police research, challenges (i.e. administrative, methodological, ethical and emotional) are presented. The chapter closes with suggestions and avenues for reflection formulated to guide young scholars conducting applied research in the police field.

2 Criminological Research on Policing: As Rich as Challenging

Since the mid-twentieth century, criminological researchers have been interested in studying different aspects of the police profession. According to Greene (2014), early studies focused on the functioning of police services from an organisational and public administrative perspective, followed by research on police cultures and police officers' interactions with the public. Later, particular attention was paid to policing approaches, including community policing, problem-solving policing, hot-spot policing and intelligence-led policing. While the research was shaped by a critical approach, a new tradition known as applied police research emerged in the 1970s and aimed 'to develop theories, frameworks and/or empirical evidence to inform and support policing policy and practice' (Cockbain & Knutsson, 2014, p. 2).

Unlike medicine, criminal justice practices have often not been based on robust scientific evidence (Welsh & Farrington, 2001). But since the late 1990s, a stream of research has promoted so-called evidence-based approaches to determining the effectiveness of crime prevention programmes, including police strategies (Sherman et al., 1998). Beyond the search for scientific evidence about policing, this approach encouraged producing and disseminating knowledge. In that regard, the police profession has raised and continues to raise a wide range of issues for researchers. However, several authors criticised the evidence-based current since it focuses to a large extent on measuring the performance of police interventions and promotes methodological standards that are too high to be applied in policing (Mitchell & Huey, 2019).

In a cross-sectional study of the police literature review, Wu et al. (2018) note that in 2014, 32% of the publications listed dealt with police strategies, 24% with police organisation, 18% with attitudes and behaviours, 11% with accountability and misconduct, 8% with citizen satisfaction and 5% with measurement issues. In that regard, criminological research produces knowledge by adopting a broad, interdisciplinary view of a situation, taking two primary forms. On the one hand, it may be new information that the stakeholders have not considered. On the other hand, even if the results do not provide fundamentally new knowledge, they provide empirical support that can be useful, especially for future decision-making. The involvement of a third party – in this case, academia – can facilitate accountability and transparency in policing.

Despite a strong interest in policing, it should be noted that the relationship between police and research has not always been comfortable. The divergent and sometimes antagonistic imperatives, objectives and cultures of the police and academia have led to tensions between the two worlds, whether organisational, cultural or interpersonal (Dawson & Williams, 2009; Goode & Lumsden, 2018). Researchers are perceived as being too academic, not speaking the same language, having production times that do not match the pace of police work, or conducting their research from an ivory tower far removed from the reality of the field. Conversely, researchers may perceive that police officers do not pay enough attention to theory, prefer quick research and do not know how to apply research results (Dawson & Williams, 2009).

These contrasting views have shaped the idea that a partnership between these two entities is complex, if not impossible, or only beneficial to science, describing the research–police relationship as a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ (Bradley & Nixon, 2009; Macdonald, 1987, p. 1). Additionally, memories of the somewhat critical currents towards the police remain in people’s minds and may present another obstacle to implementing partnerships (Engel & Whalen, 2010; Bradley & Nixon, 2009). Nevertheless, there is a growing willingness to combine research and practice and integrate research findings into practice. Science should be seen as an additional resource to be used by the police, providing information complementary to field experience (Sherman, 2015).

3 Implementing a Practice–Research Partnership: Different Ways of Approaching It

Bridging the gap between practice and research is increasingly encouraged, mainly under the impetus of the academic community (Grieco et al., 2014). The literature discusses several modalities and types of police–academia partnerships, ranging from the researcher’s role to the research’s impact. These aspects vary from one partnership to another and can influence the relationship and its success between the stakeholders. Based on our experience, the partnership is discussed from three perspectives: the researcher’s position, the level of stakeholders’ involvement and project funding.

3.1 *Position of the Researcher*

The researcher’s position refers mainly to where the researcher works. The most common affiliation is to a university or research institute. As research centres, universities produce invaluable theoretical and empirical knowledge. However, there are other models where employment is split between academia and a police organisation, or the researcher may join the police organisation full-time. These different possibilities are detailed below.

- (i) *Academic researcher*: The researcher is commissioned for a specific project to collect and analyse data, write a report, and present the findings (Braga, 2013). Thus, the researcher is an outsider to the police, and this external position allows the researcher to maintain objectivity. However, academic researchers may miss some of the reality on the ground and local specificities. Indeed, to be relevant and valuable, science must respond to the priorities set by the police and the problems they encounter daily (Weisburd & Neyroud, 2011).
- (ii) *Embedded researcher*: A researcher with civilian status can be contracted within a police organisation to carry out research activities in what Brown (1996, cited by Dawson & Williams, 2009) refers to as ‘inside outsiders’ or, according to Braga (2013), ‘embedded criminologists’ (a term coined by Petersilia, 2008). The embedded criminologist may also have a parallel affiliation with a university (Braga & Davis, 2014). Probably under the impetus of the evidence-based policing movement, more police organisations or police academies employ researchers or create internal research units. An insider familiar with the system would be better able to use the appropriate channels to communicate and disseminate relevant information more widely, whether in a meeting or a coffee break (Braga, 2013; Lum et al., 2012). Thus, the individual is better able to apply scientific knowledge to practice. Knowing the police environment can also enhance the researcher’s credibility (Braga & Davis, 2014). However, if the researcher joins the police organisation, there is

a risk of losing scientific objectivity or neutrality by becoming immersed in the police culture (Innes & Everett, 2008), although this assumption is not shared by all (Engel & Whalen, 2010; Braga, 2013). Regardless, it is essential to put safeguards in place, such as seeking an outside perspective (Braga, 2013).

- (iii) *Pracademics*: Police officers with a degree and research background (Willis, 2016; Santos & Santos, 2019), enabling them to liaise with external researchers, conduct research, and disseminate scientific research knowledge within the police organisation (Willis, 2016). Although Willis (2016) highlights the value of pracademics, he remains sceptical about certain aspects. Notably, he mentions the risk of reducing the use of academic researchers and weakening scientific objectivity given the highly hierarchical, even militarised, structure of police organisations. A compromise would be a combination of academic researchers and pracademics to pool the knowledge and skills of both worlds (Willis, 2016).

All three positions are observed in Canada and Switzerland, although the researcher as an external partner is the most common. While this position favours the researcher's freedom and scientific objectivity, it perpetuates a common criticism: researchers are too far removed from the reality of police work. Moreover, our experience shows that external researchers' work is frequently limited to the task assigned. The findings are the subject of a report, without always having the opportunity to present them or discuss them with a broader police audience than the main interlocutor. Thus, there is a lack of visibility and dissemination of the knowledge produced within the police organisation, which hinders its assimilation by practitioners.

Although this approach is not unanimous, some Swiss and Canadian police services and police academies are gradually opening their doors to academics. In this respect, the *Centre de recherche et de développement stratégique* of the *École nationale de police du Québec* (a research division within the police academy), created in 2012, plays a central role in police knowledge for the Quebec police services and is responsible for training police officers for the entire territory of Quebec. It independently initiates and carries out analysis projects, responds to requests from police organisations or third parties and participates in external collaborations. There is a dual configuration in that the centre includes embedded criminologists but also relies on external researchers. Another example is the cantonal police of Basel-Stadt (Switzerland), which established a specialised research unit in 2018. This unit is responsible for making available scientific literature results and researching topics of interest to the police organisation (Gut, 2020).

Finally, the role of pracademic is one that we have encountered least in our experience. Although many people with both police and academic backgrounds work in police organisations, they are not necessarily 'double hatted'; research work is rarely included in their job description. However, this does not mean they will not use their scientific knowledge and skills, especially in mediating roles between the police and the academic world. For example, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police has a Research advisory committee that includes pracademics from several

police organisations. Their role is to facilitate collaboration by bringing the two worlds together and ensuring that practices are consistent, at least partly, with the best practices put forward by research. Notably, participating in such projects is primarily a matter of personal choice and interest, as research training in police organisations remains marginal compared to other more ‘immediate’ knowledge, such as law.

3.2 *Level of Involvement*

This section discusses the stakeholders’ different levels of proximity and involvement across academia and police in the partnership. In their study, Rojek et al. (2012b) identify the following three forms of partnership: (i) *cooperation*: characterised by more informal and short-term exchanges, such as sharing advice and making data available to researchers; (ii) *coordination*: a more formalised relationship leading to a concrete project; the partnership is terminated at the end of the project; and (iii) *collaboration*: the most formalised and robust level of partnership. Projects are multiplying, and both parties are involved, working together and co-producing the study. There is a shift from doing research on or for the police to doing research with the police.

Throughout our careers, we were often involved in projects based on cooperation or coordination with a police organisation, with collaborations being less common (Rojek et al., 2012b). Several factors determine the level of stakeholder involvement. Financial and human resources are often the main reasons for little or no involvement in a partnership.

The willingness to participate also depends on the police organisation’s interest and expectations of science (Santos & Santos, 2019). A police organisation that does not see the benefits of such a partnership, or is afraid of the results, will not waste its time and money on it. On the other hand, the purpose of the partnership or research is another critical parameter. However, it is true that collaborations are more challenging to set up and often rely on a relationship of trust built over time (Engel & Whalen, 2010; Goode & Lumsden, 2018). Turnover within the police organisation can present an obstacle to building a relationship of trust, as these relationships – whether on the academic or police side – are more about the person than the institution. It is often necessary to build a relationship every time there is a new decisionmaker in place (Engel & Whalen, 2010).

3.3 *Funding of the Research Work*

In this section, we return to the topic of research funding in more detail, distinguishing between three situations: (i) *university or research institute funding*: research is funded by the university or research institute, not external resources; (ii) *external*

organisation funding: the police or other organisation funds all or part of the project costs based on a mandate or contract; and (iii) *subsidy funding*: several public and private organisations or foundations provide research grants.

While all situations have pros and cons, one dilemma is particularly important for policing researchers. Funding means that it is possible to conduct the project, which is often appealing to the researcher, but often comes with compromises, for example, control over the final product. It is up to the researcher to set the necessary limits at the project's onset to preserve scientific freedom and prevent censoring or changing aspects of the work without due justification, a situation that is not frequent when projects are funded by universities, research institutes or funding agencies. As an example, the second author of this chapter received a research mandate from the political entity that supervised a police organisation in Quebec. Although it was a constant struggle, partly because the police organisation wanted to be informed of the results before the political body, it was possible to maintain a comfortable distance because due dates were negotiated before any research was conducted. Still, it was only possible to conduct the project if the researchers agreed to several conditions.

4 Initiating Police Fieldwork: Gaining Access, Trust and Acceptance

One of the first stages of a study is to gain access to the field of investigation. While the police do not need the scientific community to carry out their primary duties, scholars need the police to conduct studies (Engel & Whalen, 2010). However, access to this field is not always straightforward, and many issues are at stake. In this section, we discuss access to the field from the perspective of requests for authorisation and the social acceptance of the researcher within the police organisation.

4.1 Official Approval Processes

Authorisations depend primarily on what the researcher needs and what he or she intends to do with it. For example, there may be approval procedures to obtain access to data, administer a survey to police officers, conduct an observation during a police patrol, implement a new strategy or obtain approval from an ethics committee to conduct the study. While some authorisations are strictly related to the police organisation, others involve external institutions. Some issues related to approvals are illustrated with three examples drawn from our experience.

The first example is taken from a Swiss study evaluating a police strategy that the first author managed. Regarding ethics, a summary procedure took place during the

Scientific Committee review for grant approval. Nevertheless, the affiliated academic institution did not have a standard protocol for ethical approvals for non-human experiments at the time the study was launched. However, other avenues of approval were required, such as political approval and cooperation with the residents' registration office to survey the public's perception of security. To do this, the first author had to send a note to the municipality, followed by a request to the residents' registration office and, finally, a request for a service to obtain the data from the residents' registration office. In terms of time, four months elapsed between the first steps and the receipt of the data. Undeniably, the cumbersome nature of the procedures and exchanges between the different stakeholders slowed the project's progress.

In Canada, the process is dual. For a study about the impact of curfews related to the COVID-19 pandemic on crime in Montreal that the second author managed, researchers first had to contact the police organisation to learn what data could be shared with them. Then, they had to inform their university ethical board about the data they would request from the police organisation. They also had to complete a formal request for cooperation from the police organisation. All researchers had to be 'cleared' by the police organisation before any data could be shared, which took about six months. At the same time, the university granted an ethics certificate stating that researchers could use the data requested without risk to the persons involved or the researchers themselves. After those processes, the data extraction could begin at the police organisation. Including expected logistics back-and-forth between the police organisation and the research team (e.g. identifying the format of the data and the procedures to acquire it), the whole process took about a year.

The process can be nevertheless considered relatively short because no human participant was solicited for that project; longer delays from both the police organisation and the university ethics board should be expected when interviews with police officers or nominal information are requested. For example, for another study involving body-worn cameras, the researchers requested access to actual footage from the cameras, which implied that they would see individuals (and, in some cases, where they lived) without them agreeing to it because, obviously, it was not possible to get their informed consent prior to the recording. While the police organisation wanted to grant access to the footage and quickly found a practical way to do it, the university ethics board wanted to ensure that the researchers were protected and likely free from potential lawsuits before they granted approval. The board requested the opinion of lawyers responsible for access to information in Quebec, which usually takes at least an additional six months to get. Because the project was intended to last for a year, that was not realistic, and the researchers appealed that decision. The ethics board had already agreed to other parts of the project – a population survey and interviews with police officers – a process that lasted about two months. The ethics board collaborated with the researchers to find a rapid solution, and access was granted after an additional nine months.

These three examples highlight the importance of considering these aspects when designing the research protocol and timeline. The researcher needs to be aware of all these administrative procedures and the time needed to complete them.

As noted above, having a person within the police organisation sensitive to these parameters could help expedite the process in some cases. Ethical approaches to the university with which the researcher is affiliated may also add to the process and slow the project.

4.2 Acceptance of the Researchers

According to Brown (2014), one of the keys to successful scientific research in policing is the social acceptance of the researcher by the police. This can be just as important as the methodology used.

In an institution such as the police, social acceptance occurs on two levels. First and foremost, the approval of senior management is a prerequisite for obtaining permission to conduct research within a police organisation. However, Brown (2014) points out that this acceptance does not mean that the researcher and the study have the support of the police officers who may be involved in the study (e.g. by implementing a strategy or participating in interviews). The appreciation of an individual can be based on many factors (see Brown, 2014). Some recommendations are made based on our experience.

First, knowing how to communicate with the police is crucial. The researcher should avoid giving the impression that he or she is teaching the police how to do their job, giving them orders or ‘acting like the smartest person in the room’ by pouring out all his or her knowledge (Engel & Whalen, 2010, p. 375; Grieco et al., 2014). Such behaviours risk alienating interlocutors and increasing their potential reticence towards academics and science. The researcher must, therefore, adopt a humble attitude, sharing his or her expertise as a complementary resource to the police. Indeed, replacing police expertise with science is a fear expressed by police officers in a Swiss study (Schucany, 2023). It is also essential to explain to the police officers, in detail, and without intermediaries, what is at stake and what the research will produce so that they can see the sense and usefulness of this approach and then fully engage with it (Burkhardt, *forthcoming*). They may not be immediately convinced and may try to confront the researcher about the relevance and added value of the project. The pitch for the project should be based on facts and concrete examples and highlight the benefits for the police organisation of being part of the project. In this way, a proposal that presents a win–win situation is more likely to be well received.

Trust, legitimacy and credibility take time to ‘earn’, and the researcher may be tested or have their skills and knowledge questioned repeatedly (Engel & Whalen, 2010). The first author still remembers her first crucial meeting with several police representatives. As a young researcher, it was an uncomfortable moment where the lack of experience enhanced the questioning of skills. Junior researchers should be prepared, perhaps by a mentor, to face these situations to avoid being intimidated and overwhelmed.

The more experience and knowledge a researcher gains in the field, the more coping tools he or she will have to deal with these situations and the easier it will be to be accepted (Brown, 2014). Social acceptance is also a matter of anecdotes that have little to do with the project. For example, the second author regularly hears that he has asked to be tasered in various contexts other than use-of-force research. This experience has, in some ways, strengthened the relationship between the researcher and the police community.

Other aspects may seem superficial at first glance but are nonetheless noteworthy, sometimes linked to institutional and local culture. In Switzerland, for example, it is essential to mention the rank of a police officer, especially at the command level, as a sign of respect when addressing him or her, whether in writing or orally. However, a certain distance is necessary since the researcher is not one of them. So, one should say ‘Good morning, Mr Captain’ and not ‘Good morning, my Captain’ (an expression that is used among police officers). The dress code is another aspect to which attention should be paid. As in any field, it is vital to be appropriately dressed, especially for important meetings. For example, when the first author visited the Quebec National Police Academy, the second author, fortunately, informed her that jeans were not acceptable on the premises.

These various points show that communication, respect and good faith are critical factors for successful research (Macqueen & Bradford, 2017). It is essential to adapt to the specificities of the field and the population being studied, including their habits and customs. The authors advise more novice researchers to ask their mentor or gatekeeper about possible customs.

5 Methods Used in Police Research: A Brief Overview

Research can be designed using different methodologies and data collection techniques. Research methods are often divided into two categories: quantitative and qualitative methods. A study may also use a mixed methods design, combining several approaches. After reviewing these different aspects, we briefly discuss evaluative research in policing.

5.1 Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods

Regarding quantitative methods, police research relies mainly on surveys and official data such as police statistics. Qualitative methods are mainly interviews and observation (Manning, 2005), and to a lesser extent, focus groups, ethnography or case studies (Copes et al., 2011). The researcher can also use a combination of these methods if one cannot cover what needs to be studied or if it involves multiple facets (Fortin, 2010). As Greene (2014, p. 203) stresses ‘Each [method] brings a potential

perspective to the research question, which in turn shapes the ways in which these questions are pursued'. Thus, methodological selection is critical.

Numerous studies reveal that quantitative research is predominant in criminology and criminal justice research, with qualitative and mixed methods under-represented (Jenkins, 2015; Smith, 2014; Crow & Smykla, 2013). However, several researchers stress the importance of promoting the use of qualitative methods alongside quantitative approaches. These methods are complementary, allowing to explore different aspects of the object studied (Koziarski & Huey, 2021). For example, while quantitative methods determine programme effectiveness, qualitative methods help understand the mechanisms leading to outcomes (Sidebottom & Tilley, 2020). These methods can also increase the external validity of the research (Engel & Whalen, 2010) and even strengthen the relationship between academics and practitioners (Jenkins, 2015).

We have been more involved in quantitative research based on analysing police statistics or police or public survey data. These methods appear less demanding on police organisations regarding their required time and resources. Furthermore, based on our experience, we believe that police officers as well as non-researchers are less receptive to qualitative research findings or are less likely to value them. Numbers and statistical analysis expressions such as 'multinomial logistic regression' seem more credible than verbatim interviews. However, in recent years, we have increasingly supplemented our research protocols with qualitative approaches to conducting research on and with the police. Although quantitative methods allow large amounts of data to be collected quickly, qualitative approaches offer the advantage of allowing more in-depth exploration.

In the analysis of police data, we find that the primary data, such as the nature, time, location and degree of seriousness of the offences recorded by the police, are insufficient to allow a proper interpretation of the data and a fuller understanding of the phenomena. It is equally important to analyse the text describing how the crime happened and how the police officers intervened. We also increasingly prefer using interviews, sometimes combined with a survey. For example, in parallel with a statistical analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on crime, the second author wanted to know the impact on police practice that was not captured by official statistics by conducting interviews with police officers who experienced both periods, before and after the pandemic. Finally, we believe that a privileged relationship between a researcher and practitioners, such as an embedded criminologist, is conducive to using more qualitative or mixed methods. By encouraging informal exchanges, observations, interviews or focus groups, new indicators can be developed, and more detailed knowledge generated.

5.2 Evaluation Studies and Experimental Designs

In addition to the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, an important methodological aspect of police research relates to evaluative studies. Using experiments or quasi-experimental designs, these studies are mainly used to measure the impact of police intervention (see Sherman et al., 1998; Farrington et al., 2020). However, the methodological rigour required by experimental protocols is often not feasible in the social context. For example, when evaluating a police intervention, the first author's intention was to use a pre-/post-test design with a control group. However, such a methodology was ethically and legally unacceptable for the police organisation since both areas under study faced the same difficulties, and their respective populations had reached a breaking point. Thus, the police strategy was implemented in both sites. It is, therefore, sometimes necessary to find a compromise to produce valuable intelligence for the police using a more flexible and realistic methodology (Eck, 2002; Cockbain & Knutsson, 2014).

6 Doing Applied Police Research: Some Key Focus and Practical Guidance

Although the methodological design of the research is carefully considered and developed jointly by researchers and police representatives, issues and challenges can still arise. From developing the research plan to disseminating the results, we reflect herein on the stages of the research process and share practical advice based on our experience.

6.1 Research Design, Balancing Academic and Police Interests

Whether it is a matter of mission, objectives or timing, the interests of academia and the police do not always align and may even be in conflict; hence, the importance of building partnerships to find common ground.

Crime trends mainly guide police missions and strategies. Logically, applied police research also depends on the evolution of the security and crime in the area studied. On the one hand, security decisions take precedence over scientific research objectives, both from methodological and evaluative points of view. Scientific research can, therefore, only adapt to a criminogenic context. In a Swiss study evaluating a police strategy that the first author managed, a 'crisis' situation arose in the hotspots studied just before the start of the first evaluation phase. The police had to respond overnight by significantly increasing their presence, making it impossible to maintain the strategy initially planned for the study. As a result, it was necessary to wait until the situation in these two neighbourhoods had more or less normalised

before the study could be launched. On the other hand, the usefulness of a police operation might change if the strategy is no longer appropriate to the current criminogenic situation. Special attention should also be paid to the development of the environment in the immediate or adjacent vicinity of the study area. Indeed, police activity in an area close to the study site may impact the latter. Given the normal mobility of certain criminals, the possibility of a temporary displacement of a criminogenic phenomenon, for example, following a simultaneous police operation in a nearby area, should not be overlooked.

In that regard, the evolution of the environment to be analysed can have various effects on the study, such as the research agenda, the planned methodology and the work schedule of all those involved (including the police officers). On the one hand, it is essential to monitor the evolution of the situation – including the security, criminogenic, political and media context – before, during and after the study and to adapt the methodology in case of evolution (Vito & Higgins, 2014). On the other hand, we advocate providing backup plans for the research design in the form of reserved decisions (Burkhardt, forthcoming). This will make it easier to adapt the strategy in case of unexpected environmental changes. For example, as part of the implementation of a strategy, the first author had defined different levels of police visibility depending on how the crime context would develop in the days or weeks prior to implementation.

On the other hand, the scientific calendar and the police calendar rarely run at the same pace. While scientists need a certain amount of time to collect, analyse and interpret information, the police require (almost) immediate results. Particular attention can be paid to some research parameters to improve the alignment of the two agendas, such as the design of the research and its objectives, as well as the closeness between the stakeholders. For example, a study with a time horizon of several years does not seem conducive to fulfilling this immediacy requirement. A shorter format would, therefore, be preferable – if possible and by the objectives – to speed up the production of valuable results for the police. However, longitudinal studies, including experiments, tend to be long term. We encourage the reporting of results in multi-stages to overcome this disadvantage. For example, establishing a steering committee within the police organisation would benefit long-term research. In addition, the occasional presence of the researcher within the police organisation could facilitate the regular dissemination of information through occasional and largely informal presentations.

6.2 Research Implementation Involving Police Officers at an Early Stage

Besides the researcher's social acceptance, communication shortcomings can affect research success (Macqueen & Bradford, 2017). In an organisation mainly based on a robust hierarchical system, it can be assumed that implementation will be

successful by relying on the support of senior management and the power of the chain of command. However, relying on information to be passed down the chain of command runs the risk of simply giving an order without explaining the purpose and objectives of the process. Dialogue should occur with all levels of the hierarchy, especially with the police officers who are active participants in the research. It is essential to explain that the research is not intended to criticise the work of the police officers but rather to contribute to improving practices and, if necessary, to suggest ways to improve them. Moreover, this contextualising (and simultaneously trust-building) stage is critical in police culture to avoid the researcher being perceived as an outsider trying to impose a way of doing things.

When developing a police intervention to be evaluated by the first author, front-line police officers were invited to participate in the reflection on the strategy once the initial orientations had been defined. Discussions with them, both in formal meetings and on patrol, allowed both a better explanation of how this project came about and a refinement of our strategy. Unlike command staff, frontline police officers contact the public daily. Moreover, in this case, the need to review the intensity of the strategy became apparent by talking to frontline police officers working in the neighbourhoods studied.

It is, therefore, crucial to involve police officers, regardless of their hierarchical rank, in the reflection and construction of research. Grieco et al. (2014) observe that line managers tend to be more involved in the preparation of projects than in their implementation. On the other hand, supervisors of fieldworkers are more present in the implementation of projects than in the preparation phase. In our opinion, front-line staff will accept exogenous interaction and the academic view of their daily tasks the sooner they have assimilated the motivations and objectives of the approach. It should not be forgotten that to refine and improve the research, police knowledge and experience are indispensable.

6.3 Research Management, Considering the Researcher's Exposure

While the role and objectivity of the researcher have been widely discussed in the literature, less attention has been paid to the researcher's experience of interacting with the object or field of study. Sometimes, however, a researcher may face unpleasant information or situations.

When working with a police organisation, the researcher sees, reads and hears information unknown to the general public. Facts are more concrete in conversations with police officers or reading reports of investigations than in the literature or documentary films. Dealing with this type of information can be complex, especially if it involves a degree of proximity to the researcher. For example, facts that occurred in the researcher's hometown or involve people he or she knows can prove to be sensitive topics. It can also be challenging to handle evidence or material.

Reflecting on her research into child sex trafficking and the analysis of sensitive materials, Cockbain (2014, p. 29) notes that she was 'unprepared for how emotionally, mentally, and physically draining this would be' and highlights the need to develop coping strategies.

Policing and crime are sensitive and controversial topics that often elicit strong opinions. The interest of the community, media or politicians can easily be aroused. As part of a police strategy evaluation, residents of the neighbourhoods studied were invited to take part in a survey on perceptions of safety. Participants were given the opportunity to contact the researcher for further clarification. While some calls were positive because the caller wanted to obtain or provide more information, others were about people's complaints against politicians and the police. Although the first author tried to convey her impartial and independent role from the police, some harsh words were painful to hear. Besides complaints, reports of victimisation are another type of sensitive call where it is never easy to handle people's suffering.

Our experience has taught us that it is essential for a researcher to step back from the research field and the situations encountered and not be consumed by them. Reflecting on one's position as a researcher and how one feels about the object studied can be essential. However, the researcher should try to develop his/her techniques (e.g. sharing his/her feelings with colleagues and taking care not to violate the duty of discretion and confidentiality).

6.4 Research Findings, Translating Research Into Practice

The dissemination and popularisation of knowledge, its translation and applicability on the ground, and mechanisms to stimulate research in everyday policing are all part of what is known as translational criminology (Lum & Koper, 2017; The George Mason Police Research Group with David Weisburd, 2022). Although interest in research and scientific evidence is growing, many researchers agree that the findings of police research still have little impact on practice (Fyfe & Wilson, 2012; Bullock & Tilley, 2009), as police organisations do not always know how to use the findings and put them into practice.

Several parameters influence how research knowledge is received and used in practice. Nutley et al. (2007) mention four general elements: the nature of the research, the characteristics of the potential users, the linkages between research and its user communities, and the context in which the knowledge will be used. In particular, police researchers should remember that for various reasons, police officers rarely use academic journals, relying more on professional journals, professional associations and networks, or knowledge shared by colleagues or other police forces (Rojek et al., 2012a). Academic researchers should remember not to produce publications for academics if they aim to have an impact on practices (Bratton, 2006). As a consequence, the first publication made by the second author of this chapter and his research team for the body-worn camera project was a more

approachable report instead of a journal article that police officers were unlikely to consult.

Even if knowledge integration is left to strategic and operational units, researchers can already make concrete recommendations on how their findings can inform policy and be translated into practice (Lum & Koper, 2017; Dawson & Williams, 2009; Grieco et al., 2014) or even guide the organisation in implementing these findings (Engel & Whalen, 2010). Going beyond, merely reporting findings helps to highlight the practical benefits of research, particularly in research aimed at improving policing practice.

6.5 Research Dissemination, Establishing the Conditions for Publication

Dissemination makes the findings of research known and spreads information more widely. Several vectors can be used, but the most traditional for academics is publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Moreover, recognition within the scientific community is mainly based on publishing articles in journals with a high impact factor, which creates a certain pressure to publish, especially for young researchers. The publication is perceived as one of the last stages in the research process. While the researcher usually has much freedom if the university or a grant funds the study, this step can be more difficult in studies conducted with the police or using police data. The research framework and the use of results are commonly regulated by contract. Thus, publications or the terms of publication may have to be the subject of negotiation and compromise.

The first question is whether publication is allowed. Sometimes the police organisation does not want to disclose the findings report because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, the confidentiality of the data used or concerns about potential negative repercussions for the organisation (Brown, 2014). In this case, the researcher will only be able to reference the study in his or her publication list, which can be frustrating for young scholars. Therefore, it is essential to discuss this issue early in the research (Grieco et al., 2014) to avoid creating tensions once the research is completed. If dissemination is approved, the terms and conditions of dissemination will need to be defined. Stakeholders need to discuss whether the whole study can be made public or only certain parts and which channels will be used to communicate (report, article in a scientific/professional journal, conference, etc.). The level of detail of the information published is another point that needs to be addressed. For example, sometimes identifying the cities under study is not an option. In the past, the second author has been asked by the police to identify the city as a 'North American metropolis' rather than giving the name of the city concerned. As this change did not affect the usefulness of the results, the researchers agreed. More recently, a request bordered on the absurd. There was only one police equipment pilot project in the world during the period identified in the article. Hence, the name

of the city involved was evident to all. At the very least, not identifying the city could be misinterpreted (e.g. as an attempt to censor the research, which was not the case), and so the authors refused the change. The police quickly agreed.

Finally, there may be a delay of several months between the completion of the study and the publication of the findings. While the police organisation may seek to approve the final report, other factors external to the research may interfere with the study's publication, such as the political agenda. For example, the second author leads a research team working on the impact of body-worn cameras on police–population relations in Quebec (Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, 2019). Given the highly political nature of this issue, it was requested at the beginning of the work that the report be published after the general election, which occurred towards the end of the work. The authors believed it was important to highlight these points, particularly for less experienced researchers, since the result can be the researcher losing control of the research product (Brown, 2014). Awareness of these challenges can be a key factor in their anticipation.

7 Conclusion

Whether research is conducted on, for or with the police, interacting with the police is essential. An overview of the different characteristics of police–research interactions or partnerships has been provided in this chapter. The perspectives presented, including the role of the researcher, the level of police involvement and funding possibilities, are neither exhaustive nor closed, as each partnership and each area of research have different, if not unique, dynamics. The differing and sometimes antagonistic imperatives, aims and cultures of the police and academia have long led to the idea that working together is complex, if not impossible, or only beneficial to academia. However, it is possible to move beyond the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ that has been used to describe the relationship between police and academia (Bradley & Nixon, 2009; Macdonald, 1987, p. 1), as demonstrated by existing applied research and the discussion in the previous section.

However, some reluctance remains, and access to the field of policing is sometimes difficult because it implies the ability of the police service to question itself. By opening up to researchers, the police accept that they may be questioned and need to accept an outside view of how they operate. Nevertheless, access to the field and the possibility of immersion in this environment is essential for the researcher to ‘see their world as they see it’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 19). In addition to strict access to the field, a certain amount of perseverance is required, especially for young researchers, to build a relationship of trust and gain credibility and legitimacy with the police. To facilitate police research, it is necessary to consider the stakeholders’ particularities, the issues addressed and, more broadly, the security, political and media environment within which the research is taking place and is likely to develop. Indeed, a very diverse combination of knowledge and skills, including

methodological, ethnographic, political, media, management and community relations skills, is required for applied research in the policing environment (Kennedy, 2014).

Police science and applied research, as rich and challenging as they are, remain underexploited. There is a need to understand each other's competencies and resources and to valorise the contribution of both professions. In this way, it will be ensured that police science is perceived as an additional tool at the disposal of police organisations.

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Chapter 3

Research in Probation Settings: Experience and “Field Policy”



Daniel Lambelet, Jenny Ros , and Laure Kloetzer 

1 Introduction

In this chapter, we share our fieldwork experiences in a study conducted in the field of probation, especially the transactions between actors, and the friction involved between different approaches. This is what we mean by “field policy,” c.f. title of our contribution, or in French *politique du terrain*, in keeping with Olivier de Sardan (1995), the modes of production and treatment of empirical materials, the requirements placed upon the research in order to ensure the rigorous implementation of the chosen approach and the validation of results. All these elements are not insubstantial foam on the surface of the “real” research work, but rather “materials to be taken into account” (Darmon, 2005, p. 98), to be analyzed as part of the necessary reflexivity built into the scientific research process. We shall construct the process of our inquiry as a succession of reciprocal challenges put to the research team by the “field” on the one hand and by persons involved in the legal system, professional staff, and probation services on the other. In brief, our research aimed to understand the manner in which probation agents navigate the concept of risk.

A detailed examination of the conditions of access to the field, the construction of a methodological apparatus, the production of data, and the restitution and discussion of results serve to identify the challenges that researchers have to face. They are a source of discomfort and put the research team in the position of having to mobilize resources and support to overcome them (Martucelli, 2010, p. 101), especially in a field where certain problems have been ubiquitous for some time. In doing so, we do not claim to provide an inventory of the strategies (Monahan &

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Fisher, 2015) that would enable researchers to gain access to the professional domain of probation and to conduct research in it; we merely wish to question the dual dynamic of the construction of the research object, i.e., shaping of the “field” by researchers and instituting the place of research by the “field.”

2 Probation as a Field of Practice and as a Field of Research

2.1 *The Field of Probation and Its Actors in Switzerland*

Criminal justice institutions – particularly prisons – have been described as “sensitive” or “difficult” domains to research, and even termed “minefields” (de Galembert et al., 2017). Literature on the backstories and the craft of empirical research in custodial facilities underlines the constraints the prison system imposes upon detainees, custodial staff, and... researchers. Rostaing (2017) thus speaks of “observation under surveillance”; he calls for adopting a stance that considers the constraints – particularly in terms of security – of this specific social universe while refraining from any compromise on the ethical requirements of research. In addition, Jewkes (2012) draws attention to the delicate balance to be found with regard to the partition line that separates prison staff from detainees that structures all interaction: “in the prison context, researchers frequently have to position themselves (physically and ideologically) between officers and prisoners, which can be detrimental to the building of trust and rapport with both sides” (Jewkes, 2012, p. 67). As they are faced with injunctions to choose one side or the other (Becker, 1967), the attitude of researchers will strongly condition the course of their investigations and what they will be shown or told.

But what about conducting research in the field of probation? Probation is a domain that involves a control apparatus and support activities for offenders who must serve all or part of their sentence in open custody. Probation officers oversee verifying that court decisions are enforced, preventing subsequent offenses, and reinforcing social reintegration. However, the nuts and bolts of scientific research on probation have rarely been examined. In our view, this may be because probation activities in the community are viewed as an ordinary field of research that does not present specific difficulties and does not cause researchers to be confronted with the same challenges as studies conducted in the closed world of the prison.

However, it would be wrong, in our view, to stop at the simple opposition between open and closed custody. As Bourrier (2010, p. 29) points out about the risk-laden universes in which her studies take place, settings can be “simultaneously open and closed.” Our own experiences (Ros et al., 2020) certainly demonstrate that the implementation of a field investigation in a probation setting is anything but straightforward. This is particularly true when a study involves a lengthy presence in the field, involves a range of data-gathering methods (observation, interviews,

collection, and analysis of documents), and has the goal of achieving a close and in-depth understanding of cases followed by probation officers.

2.2 *Probation Supervision: An Unstable “Field”, a Sensitive Context*

In Switzerland, people can be put on probation supervision in cases of conditional release, suspended sentences (with partial or full suspension), or mandatory outpatient treatment. Probation services also take charge of people placed under electronic surveillance. Before turning to conditions of access to the field of probation in the context of an empirical study, we must place our study in a broader context by highlighting some aspects of the recent socio-political and institutional dynamics that characterize the field of the execution of penal sanctions in Switzerland. Among the changes that have taken place, the first to be mentioned concerns the modernization of state intervention inspired by the principles of *New Public Management*. This process has brought about an emphasis on efficiency, an increase in the formalization of work practices (procedures) as well as reinforced accountability requirements (justification of measures taken and traceability of interventions). In terms of elements specific to probation activities, the main impacts pertain to (i) a strengthening of the framework of professional actions (formal procedures), (ii) requirements for better transparency, and (iii) the implementation of controls meant to ensure that probation case work is carried out in accordance with existing rules.

Simultaneously and as a parallel trend, an inflection has been observed in criminal and penitentiary policies, strengthening some of the tendencies outlined above. From the 1970s, strong reservations – summarized under the banner of “Nothing Works” – had been voiced about the efficacy of the rehabilitation model in the treatment of crime (Martinson, 1974). Tragic events that took place in Switzerland during the past 25 years¹ opened a critical period of questioning the rehabilitation-oriented approaches that placed the social reintegration of offenders at the forefront. Following these events, which were as tragic as they were exceptional, and in the wake of the public outrage they caused, Swiss state authorities were led to define *risk prevention* as an overarching priority. Today, guidelines issued by cantonal heads of Justice and Police Departments (CCDJP, 2014) give it a central position. The guidelines state, for instance, that “work with the offender during the entire duration of the enforcement of the sentence must systematically be oriented towards avoiding the risk of new offenses ...” (CCDJP, 2014, p. 6). This implies an evaluation of this risk as well as the need for professional management of the

¹In 1994, a young girl scout was murdered at Zollikerberg (Zürich) by a detainee who was on furlough; in 2009, an au pair was murdered near Baden by a man who had been sentenced in 2004 for attempted homicide but freed conditionally in 2008; and more recently, in 2013, in the case of the so-called tragedy of Payerne, a man sentenced in 2000, who was serving the end of his sentence under house arrest, kidnapped, sequestered, and murdered a young woman he had recently met.

offender that serves as the basis of an “intervention plan” that the various professionals involved will have to follow (CCDJP, 2014, p. 14). These new orientations have contributed to changes in the status of “risk” in the entire professional field pertaining to the enforcement of penal sanctions – notably in probation services. *Risk* is no longer seen as an eventuality, as something that could arise in some situations; it is now posited as the primary structuring dimension of professional interventions. Instruments for risk evaluation have also been introduced in order to be able to categorize probation cases not on the basis of the “fallible” judgment of probation officers, but using objective, factual elements to orient the ways in which professionals must intervene (evidence-based practices in probation).

For our purposes, we shall thus keep in mind that while probation includes support practices as well as control of offenders, probation services and officers who must implement probation measures are now themselves under surveillance. In Switzerland, studies in the field of probation thus take place in uncertain times and the context of increased vulnerability of professionals (Lambelet, 2018). As a consequence of these new intervention principles calibrated primarily in terms of security, “risk is central to the process of accountability and the allocation of responsibility in the light of things going wrong” (Kemshall, 2000, p. 468). In other words, as Jendly (2012, p. 255) points out, professionals are made accountable for their “appropriate risk management.”

2.3 *A Qualitative Research Approach and Its Ethical Issues*

The study we refer to in this chapter was conducted between 2018 and 2019 in three probation services in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. It was part of a research project at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (Department of Social Work) and focused on the risk management methods carried out by probation officers. The study did not require formal procedures and requirements, e.g., approval from an ethics committee. The possibility of such a committee is controverted, in view of the counterproductive effects it could have, such as the standardization of research practices and the valorization of procedural ethics at the expense of a more reflective process (Cefai, 2010). Regarding ethics, research projects are expected to abide by at least the principles of scientific integrity defined by the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences (2021), namely, reliability, honesty, respect, and responsibility. In our research, we considered thoroughly the ethical implications that we discuss in the next paragraphs.

In the course of our research, three methods were used for data collection. First, *non-participatory observation* (around 120 hours) within the three probation services involved in our study. In each site, we spent around 40 hours, during different half and full days. In some instances, if the probation service was far from our living place, we would spend several consecutive days. This technique gave us the opportunity to closely follow probation officers in their daily duties. The latter consisted of follow-up interviews with probationers or inmates, team meetings, collaborative

meetings outside of the service, and informal exchanges during breaks or commute time. These moments of observation lead to the taking of handwritten notes in a notebook, as well as the keeping of research logs on a safe Swiss server, meant to support our reflective process. Our findings and interrogations were also discussed with the professionals involved in an effort to invite them to elaborate their practices: the objectives pursued, the meaning behind their actions, the elements that draw their attention and seem useful to better target the follow-up, and so on. After each day of observation, we would fill in our fieldwork journal with all observations and reflections from the day.

Second, we also analyzed *probation files* aggregating heterogeneous information such as the court decisions that qualify the facts by the law, sometimes psychiatric reports or criminological assessments, behavior reports regarding the period spent in detention, reports from probationary follow-up interviews, or administrative documents. The analysis was conducted on anonymous copies of these files and aimed to examine how probation officers seize key pieces of information to target the follow-up, how links are made between the different files, and how these participate in distance communicate with other professionals or organizations.

Third, *interviews* are aimed at clarifying professional activity and making it explicit, inspired by the “instructions to a double” method (Oddone et al., 2015). In these interviews, we invited probation professionals to describe, in great depth, their interventions in cases they were following, as though we were going to replace them in the follow-up of these cases. These interviews were entirely recorded and transcribed, before being analyzed. We address these aspects further below. Naturally, collecting all these data continuously raised questions for us regarding the ethical issues posed by our approach: participation based on informed consent, commitment to the anonymity of individual data, and so on. The implementation of the principles of scientific integrity alone did not resolve everything. In fact, our ethnographic study that was conducted so close to situations of probation supervision gave us access to pieces of personal stories which had the potential to be as trivial as intimate and that can be a cause of discomfort on one side or the other. What position should we, as researchers, adopt then? For example, in the following situation, during a follow-up interview, we were taking part as observers.

Mr. R., 71 years old, was convicted to a custodial sentence of 36 months for committing acts of a sexual nature on a person incapable of acting with discretion. The execution of his sentence was suspended and he was granted a reprieve with a probation period of four years. He was placed under the supervision of a probation officer, obligated to undergo an outpatient psychotherapeutic treatment and forbidden to be alone in the presence of a child under 16 years old. He arrives in the office out of breath, which is unusual for him. When the probation officer inquires as to what is going on, Mr. R. only mentions the changes in temperature... Throughout the entire interview, as the professional brings up his hobbies, his neighborly relations, etc., to ensure he does not find himself in situations with minor children involved, his enunciation remains irregular, interrupted by loud inhalations, clearly indicating stress. (Fieldwork note 1).

During the discussion we had right after the interview, the probation officer in charge linked the state of Mr. R. with his ambivalence toward the obligations he is

subjected to and an unfinished subjective maturation toward his crime. This “translation” has a heuristic value in the context of research looking for an in-depth understanding of how professionals proceed. However, on the other hand, another hypothesis might be that the discomfort of the probationer could also arise from having to answer the professional’s intrusive questions in the presence of the researcher. How about the impact of this study on its participants then? Should the conduct of this study follow an action plan to favor “expertise,” maintaining distance, remaining insensitive to the reactions of the people under observation or “solicitude,” considering sensitive aspects (Dodier, 1993), and looking for means to reduce the negative impacts of this observation? These issues were the object of several discussions among the team.

3 Phases of Fieldwork

3.1 *Proofs and Challenges: Conditional Access to the Field*

And yet, do probation services actually belong to these “hard-to-access criminal justice organizations” (Trulson et al., 2004), in which gaining a right of entry and sufficient openness to be able to conduct research requires great efforts? In any event, access to the field of probation is subject to obtaining various authorizations, starting with the green light from heads of probation services who act as “formal gatekeepers” (Hayes, 2005; Reeves, 2010). Their evaluation of the nature of the research and what its results may – or may not – contribute is the first challenge to be overcome and its outcome will determine the fate of the project.

In our case, even though our object of study – the ways in which probation officers take risk into account and how they ensure the security of their interventions – had the reputation of being “one of the most politically sensitive research topic” (Kemshall, 2000, p. 466), we thought we could rely on existing contacts and the collaborations established in the context of detention, in probation services, of social work trainees from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland. We thus contacted three probation services – selected for their location, their size, and the diversity of their internal organizations – in order to obtain their authorization for conducting the research. After having waited for a while, getting in touch with them again, and providing clarifications and further details on various aspects of our research project, we were turned down by all three of them. See below an example of an e-mail received as a response to our request:

“Re: Request for a research project

Date: April 12, 2017

Sir,

Please forgive the late answer to your request.

After discussions with my team, I regret to inform you that we will not be able to make the necessary time available for participation in your study, despite its

clearly interesting character. However, in terms of timing, your presence will coincide with the implementation of new penal rules that will have a direct impact on my service, and as we are unfortunately understaffed, I will not be able to put time and personnel at your disposal.

I can only wish you complete success for your project and remain, of course, available for a later request from your team, to which I would hope to be able to respond positively.

In the meantime, I remain sincerely yours,
Head of office” (Rejection email received by the research team)

The reasons used to justify these negative responses are not exceptional in any way. Other researchers in probation studies receive very similar answers: “Rather than provide definitive rejections, these institutions normally will delay making any decision, saying things like: “Now’s not a good time” or “I’ll have to check with someone else” or they simply will not respond at all” (Monahan & Fisher, 2015, p. 722). However, it would be wrong to view them solely as dilatory strategies. For instance, the reduced availability of probation officers due to the implementation of managerial reforms mentioned above does actually render the articulation of the temporalities of research and professional intervention more difficult. The fact remains that other reasons should also probably be taken into consideration when trying to understand the unanimous refusals met by our requests. In more general terms, one may wonder whether the evolution of penal policies, briefly outlined above, might not lead to social work research in the prison and probation fields being given a marginal status.

Within the economy of knowledge that currently prevails in the criminal justice realm, where scientific evidence (Burrell & Rhine, 2013) is viewed as the necessary basis for any safe intervention, “the collective capital of methods and specialized concepts” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 129) belonging to social work does have marginal status. Moreover, qualitative research as such finds itself in a rather devalued position. In addition, our study sets up a configuration and outlines an approach far removed from studies mandated by various instances (Champy-Remoussenard, 2012) as well as from the types of evaluation research that institutional actors tend to favor. In contrast to these kinds of studies, our research does not directly answer calls from state authorities such as the Federal Office for Justice (OFJ). It does not conform to norms such as those issued by the Swiss Society for Evaluation (SEVAL) that are supposed to ensure systematic implementation on the basis of defined and transparent principles. Moreover, it is not primarily praxeological in character. In contrast to other recent studies (Rüflin et al., 2013; Schwarzenegger et al., 2013; Volet & Aebi, 2013), our priority is not to directly devise instruments for professional action, propose new practice modalities, or improve the efficacy of existing interventions. Instead, our main objective was to understand how the probation agents managed the risks in their daily practice with the probationers.

In spite of the difficulties we encountered, we intensified our efforts to find a probation service that would grant us access, rising to the challenge of being recognized and “achieving the status of an outsider trusted with ‘inside knowledge’”

(Bucerius, 2013, p. 690). During preliminary discussions with the managers of probation services, we thus had to demonstrate that we had sufficient knowledge of the legal framework, the possible paths within the criminal justice system, or the different bodies' roles and jurisdictions. We also opted to pledge that the presence of researchers would not disrupt the daily routine of the probation services that would open their doors to us. Finally, the fact that obstacles could be overcome was a coincidence. In parallel to our project, the representative organizations of probation work had asked the Faculty of Social Work of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland to develop a postgraduate program for specialized workers in the field of penal justice. In the context of the implementation of a training curriculum that would meet professional needs, our research project, which aimed at apprehending the nature of probation officers' work, became more "acceptable."

These vicissitudes bring to light the fact that access to the field may sometimes depend on a combination of circumstances and that it is greatly facilitated by formal gatekeepers seeing the potential benefit for their own institution of allowing the research to proceed. However, they also demonstrate that the negotiations to gain access to probation settings and practices are part and parcel of the definition and regulation process governing the types of studies deemed legitimate in this field, as well as the conditions under which they must be conducted. One may wonder to what extent the *utilitarian agenda*, which apparently serves as an institutional filter, gives a particular tone to the production of knowledge about this professional world. Moreover, beyond the question of entry by researchers into the probation field, the challenge of maintaining this fragile agreement remains in general, and in our specific case remained as well, a cause of concern throughout the entire research process.

3.2 *A Methodological Sidestep*

3.2.1 **Selecting Methods and Adapting Them to Local Contexts**

Bauwens (2010, p. 39), in a review of existing research, reported that: "Qualitative research in probation is predominantly interview-based" or composed of evaluations of offender behavior programs in the community. Since our research objectives were focused on apprehending, in the closest proximity possible, the contextualized practices aimed at ensuring the security of interventions implemented by probation officers, the ideal method would have been to video record sequences of activity that could be used as support for individual and collective analysis. However, as the anonymity of probationers had to be guaranteed, such means could not be used. We thus had to resort to some degree of methodological creativity to get around this obstacle and to find a way to still have access to what professionals actually do.

On the one hand, it was crucial to not merely fall back on the discourse of probation officers about their work. On the other, it was also important not to fall prey to an illusion about transparency, which would have us believe that direct observation, by itself, would enable us to understand what underpins actions (goals, reasoning, meaning), and what is mobilized by them (markers, instruments, etc.). In this vein, markers were the indicators utilized by the probation agents such as the change of the probationer’s attitude or identification of contradictions during the follow-ups. The resources were defined as the instruments used during their practice such as risk evaluation instruments or the file of the probationer. This is why we opted for the method of *triangulation*, described by Bauwens (2010, p. 41) as allowing the cross-fertilization of perspectives and enriching understanding, particularly through “the combination of files analysis, interviews and observations.” In more specific terms, as well as collection and analysis of documentary sources and direct observation, we used a method of verbalization of activity known as an *instruction to a double* (Oddone et al., 2015), which entails asking professionals to give instructions to the researcher as though the latter were to act in an identical manner to the professional.

The implementation of this method is carried out under specific conditions. First, the instructions given by the professionals (in this case probation officers) do not pertain to their work in general but to a particular sequence of activity in a specific case. Second, when asking questions, researchers invite professionals to remain focused on the situation at hand, to describe in detail the concrete dimensions of the actual process, to talk about what they do and how they do it (e.g., when referring to a follow-up interview with a probationer, how do I welcome the person into my office? Where do we seat? How do I start the interview? What should the tone of our exchanges exactly be? Do I take notes about what is being said? Which ones? etc.); and, at the same time, the researcher may also submit alternative courses of action that might be taken in order to see how they are resolved by the officers. Third, the verbal material that has been collected in this way is audio-recorded and then transcribed. So doing, what has been said is seen as a trace, which can open further reflections. The research setting created by the technique of instruction to a double allows the probation officers to discuss and read again what they said, fostering individual or collective reflexive commentaries.

In two of the three study sites – the probation offices – the method of instruction to a double was deployed collectively. While one of their colleagues was giving instructions to the researcher acting as a “double,” the other probation team members were listening and writing down what they found surprising and the questions that occurred to them. Then a period of discussion was set up during which various aspects of the interventions proposed in the case that had been described were discussed. In one of the services studied, because of time constraints pertaining to the organization of the officers’ work, as well as because of the fragile state of the probation teams due to recent changes (restructuring of the service due to changes or reduction of staff, strengthened focus on risk prevention), our methodology could only be implemented on an individual basis. However, we still attempted to conserve its characteristics in terms of stepping back from interventions, confrontation

of different standpoints, and reflexive examination of one's actions. In total, this technique lasted for about half a day.

3.2.2 Feedback as a Means to Further Gather Materials

While Trulson et al. (2004) insist on the importance of providing feedback on the progress of the research process to develop trust, difficulties in maintaining anonymity when reporting the results within a rather small professional community also came to light. Conducting a study necessitates the direct involvement of researchers with the professionals who participate in it and requires that they anticipate possible negative consequences at different levels (personal, institutional...) of any communication. Since our observations as well as the detailed description of cases presented to us contained information that would make it easy to identify the participants, we had to think about a way to give feedback to the professionals in our study that would conform to the ethical principle of *primum non nocere* – first, do no harm. We respected this principle by taking a detour via the presentation of hypothetical cases that would challenge the participants as professionals and invite them to share their perceptions of the case, the level of risk it presented, and the ways it should be handled. On the basis of the materials we had gathered, we thus created a mediating artifact, as close as possible to situations actually encountered in the field, that could be used as the basis to launch a discussion. See the following vignette:

Detour with a constructed case. The head of the open custody case team has given you a new situation to follow. It concerns a man, Mr. Toby Freed, aged 34, who has been convicted for various previous infractions as a minor (including thefts as well as violations of Narcotics' Control legislation). Then, as an adult, he was condemned to a custodial sentence of three and half years – partially suspended – for a series of offences (including robbery and assault). The suspension was revoked after a new sentence for 18 months in prison (thefts, assault and battery, new Narcotics' Control infractions, etc.). The execution of this new sentence has been suspended and ambulatory treatment as well as probation support have been mandated.

When examining the case file, you find that Mr. Toby Freed was the subject of disciplinary sanctions when he was in detention because of his behavior. He was subjected to a psychiatric expert evaluation, but there is no copy of it in the file. Similarly, there is no plan of execution of the sanction in the file.

Called to a first appointment, Mr. Toby Freed does not show up. When you get hold of him on the phone, he says he forgot and brings up the highly precarious situation he lives with no fixed abode, and few financial resources... which surprises you since the file stated he was going to live at his girlfriend's flat. You give him a new appointment, about two weeks after his release. After meeting him on three occasions and having collected the required information, you fill out the risk score grid (cf. annexed document). The score obtained indicates that the situation is on the border of the threshold requiring high vigilance.

What priorities would you set for your interventions in this situation? And why?

This vignette serves as a dialogical artifact (Kostulski & Kloetzer, 2014) for triggering discussion and collective reflection among probation officers. By using this approach, we avoided undue personalization of feedback to interviewees while also

instituting a space for discussion and collective elaboration among peers in a context where each professional usually has to carry out interventions as an individual. Even though we were not in an intervention-research configuration, having the professionals participating in our study jointly reflect upon this situation and discussing markers that may orient the approaches that would be implemented in this case allowed us to reintroduce the collective level as a means to shore up each other’s intervention. This enabled us to associate them with interpretation and knowledge-building work. More than an aside to the research process, feedback became a truly constitutive element of it.

4 Conducting – or Not Conducting – the Course of Research...

As we just mentioned with regard to the methodological apparatus, having to position ourselves as researchers in a highly constrained environment can mean bringing some “play” back into a system (Winnicott, 1971) in which everything seemed already fixed and settled. This entails reintroducing creative ways to deal with this environment, to relate to it, and to act. The process of conducting field research in probation makes for a stark reminder that researchers must give up attempts to master its course from end to end. Issues of position and role provide good examples of this process. As researchers, in the eyes of participants, we occupy a kind of “no-man’s land” (Reeves, 2010, p. 323) as we are neither supervisors or officers nor probationers. This meant that probation officers as well as the persons they follow had to place us on the basis of certain markers.

During the interviews with the probationers in the office of the probation officer, we would sit on a chair slightly behind the probation agent and take notes in a notebook. Depending on our professional background, our institutional affiliation, our age, our gender identity, etc. we were associated with other familiar professional figures such as social workers, psychologists, interns, or trainees. We were thus perceived, at various times or simultaneously, as occupying different positions: a research team member sitting in during a follow-up interview alongside a woman probation officer, for instance, made a probationer irritated, as he assumed that the researcher was an intern, like the medical interns on the addiction team, who are replaced every few months and with whom he constantly has to start anew building a relationship. Also, the presence in the team of two psychologists created an expectation, among some of the officers, that they could rely on their expert knowledge to decode the attitude and the reactions of probationers who display severe psychological problems. Rather than systematically trying to rectify these misapprehensions, we opted to consider these “wrong addresses” as avenues to better understand the experience of probationers (in this case, what is difficult for them) and of professionals (in our example, what they found challenging). We then examine how this

interpretation of the professionals might influence the materials we gathered as well as the construction of new knowledge.

The unexpected aspects built into the qualitative field research process also caused the study team to gradually become more aware of risks taken by professionals and probation services who were participating in the research. Even though we knew that taking part in a study may expose participants, we had underestimated the extent to which the context of the tragic events that shaped Swiss policy mentioned earlier, the doubts cast onto professional judgment, the suspicions of possible failings, involved in terms of potential exposition to danger for professionals. As a matter of fact, as our study progressed, we recognized that probation officers were not following to the letter the rules and regulations that framed their work. We saw that, alongside the assessment and risk management procedures, their practices still displayed elements of artful expertise, based more on their experience than on actuarial logic. We even understood that, in some cases, professionals cast doubt on the parameters upon which the statistical calculation of the risks presented by a given situation are meant to rest and that are supposed to determine their professional intervention.

Our study functioned, therefore, as a kind of unveiling operation that brought to light existing deviations from the rules governing interventions. And this took place at a time when the professionals we encountered were talking to us about the unspoken burden placed on their shoulders that led them to interiorize the fact that anything that might happen in a case placed in their hands was their responsibility: “[...] it’s silly what I’m telling you but when you hear there are very grave cases going on in our canton, when there’s talk of murder or whatever, the first question you ask yourself is: is it one of my cases? [...] You still have this fear, you think: but in the end if something happens with one of my cases, for sure they are going to search who made a mistake, who didn’t notice, who didn’t react.” (Specialist in penal sanctions, Office of sanctions and probation 5, trained as a social worker, in her present job for 2 and a half years, quoted in Lambelet, 2022).

The ethical burden derived from the possible impact of our production of empirical materials and their analysis was thus even greater. The worries that bring to light the persistence of de-legitimated practices could put participants in our study at odds with officialdom or in uncomfortable positions, both within the probation service or more broadly, certainly conditioned the manner in which envisaged disseminating the results of our research. While these results were shared more widely through publications in scientific journals, not betraying the trust we were given also remained a central concern. Thus, the data were kept anonymous by deleting all identifying indications (full name, employer, location, or exact position occupied). These were stored in a secure manner, and raw data were separated from anonymous data.

4.1 *Emotions Contained*

As Genard and Roca i Escoda (2019, p. 49) noted, interaction as part of a study is “also an interpersonal relationship” saturated with effects of all sorts, which sometimes make it difficult for researchers to maintain distance from the object of study. An episode that happened in the course of our study illustrates our embarrassment face to a troubled person expressing themselves in an interview with a probation officer and highlights the ethical issues raised by this discomfort. See the following fieldwork note:

The unconceived part of the “emotional work” (see Hochschild, 2017) of probation officers and the blindness of the researcher. During a debriefing (with the method of instruction to a double), a probation officer told us about the situation of a 49-year-old man, sentenced for causing serious bodily injury and diverse offences under the law on drugs, to a custodial sentence of two years alongside mandatory institutional treatment as he suffered from psychiatric disorders (personality disorder with paranoid tendencies). After three requests denied due to a risk to reoffend, he was finally granted a conditional release with the obligation to pursue treatment, abstinence controls, etc. He has been placed under the supervision of a probation officer for close to four years now.

From the very beginning, just from reading the file, this case rose concern within the service (“Honestly, we felt uneasy... we thought, will he just stab us with a knife?”). This led to a decision to assign two officers to the case. And just as the professionals feared, establishing a follow-up turned out to be complicated (“He said that we treated him as a fool, that we disrespected him, that we didn’t understand anything, and this, and that... when we offered him administrative support, it was ‘no, do you think I’m stupid!’? That’s it!”).

After that, the probation officer in question pursued the supervision on his own. At times, this one had the impression that they were forming a functional relationship. (“When talking about what he likes to do: music, history, it created a link... I was glad.”) But soon after, all of that was ruined: “He flips out and throws it all away.”

During our talk, the probation officer expressed a feeling of fear (“Honestly, he loses his temper easily, uses crude words, but the last time, when suddenly he placed his feet on the table and started stamping as hard as possible, I had my hand placed on the alarm button”), a feeling of helplessness or fatigue (“I can’t stand this anymore, he got me exhausted, worn out”), and a decrease in professional self-esteem (“the situation is going nowhere... I keep thinking about it but can’t find any solution”).

Even though we could not remain indifferent to the distress expressed by this officer, our interventions during the interview maintained a certain distance face to the emotional nature of what was shared.

The reflexive analysis we conducted later on the field note mentioned above (Lambelet et al., 2021) highlighted the added difficulty of being in the presence of an individual with important psychiatric disorders. It is only after the study was completed when we heard that this same probation officer’s health was impaired (extended medical leave), which we realized how much we had neglected to take into account the efforts he had made to manage his emotions. It is as if the imperatives of scientific research had us confined in a relationship to our object “à la troisième personne [in the third person]” (Genard & Roca i Escoda, 2019, p. 26), even though listening with more sensitivity would have brought more clarity to the emotional demands of probational work, to the social expectations of control linked

to this working environment, and the cost it represents for professionals. In addition, the follow-up interviews that we attended made us go through a whole range of emotions: compassion in relation to the precarious situation in which some found themselves, laughter when one or the other mentioned a funny event or embarrassment about details of their private life that they had to disclose to the probation agent.

As part of a research program on probation made up of several successive stages, our investigation falls within a long timeframe of two years. In the aftermath, this allows us to realize what we have missed, but also to observe the secondary effects of our investigation. For example, the fact that it is considered by the professionals involved as an expression of interest in their work and as a way to ensure better visibility if not greater acknowledgment.

5 Conclusion: Reflexivity in Action and Contextual Ethics in Field Studies

Our experience of research in the world of probation has led us to question whether it is appropriate to define a field of inquiry as, a priori, sensitive or difficult. Similarly, while we emphasized the negotiations conducted to enter the probation services since they condition both the very possibility of carrying out the study and the course it may take, we also insisted on the fact that any agreements reached remain precarious. As far as ethical commitments are concerned (participation based on a freely given consent, charter for guaranteeing the anonymity of data, ...) that are made based on supposedly universal normativity, they obviously cannot provide solutions for all the problems that may arise.

These pushes and pulls, these stops and starts, require that researchers remain in a reflexive posture during the entire investigative process (Panfil, 2021). As shown in Fig. 3.1, reflexivity is clearly an additional step of the research process, which would be seen as an attempt to add “extra soul” to the research per se, but a critical process all along the implementation of the research. Conducting a study in the field of probation cannot be summarized as designing a research plan and implementing

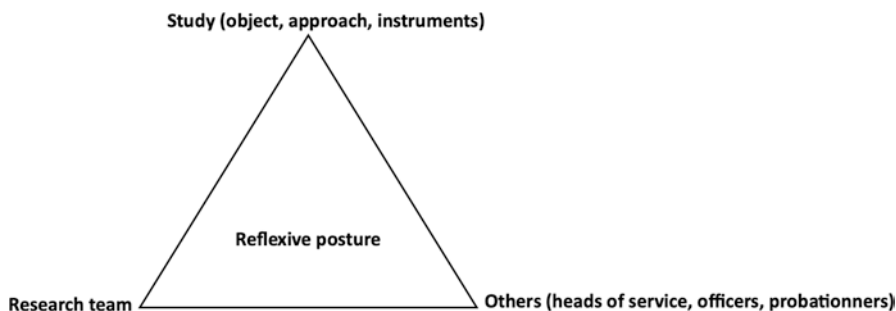


Fig. 3.1 Reflexive posture: Intersection of elements in probation studies

it in a well-structured manner. “The craftsmanship of doing qualitative research” (Beyens et al., 2015, p. 66) means that researchers must find ways to work with the many actors involved, to interpret different representations and expectations of the research context, and to make explicit the backdrop of the study to various participants (particularly because of their interests or of their fears with regard to our research objects and our scientific activity). The course of the study permanently confronts the research team with unexpected events and reactions, with constraints, pressures, choices, arbitration, and renunciations that require “a process-oriented analysis of ethical issues that are always specific and are embedded in singular configurations and instruments” (Roca i Escoda et al., 2020, p. 17).

This process of ethical questioning, continuously unfolding during the entire course of the research, brings about new challenges, debates, and developments about the methodological choices that have been made; it leads to working on the impasses in which the study gets mired and also represents a backbone that provides limits and offers support. This open questioning may also contribute to creating a climate of trust and allow a gradual widening of the field that can be investigated. In any event, this requirement for reflexivity, involving an ongoing examination of the nature of our involvement in the field of probation and our actions as researchers was, for us, a means to not scrimp on the exigencies and rules of scientific investigation. Keeping a fieldwork journal (Lourau, 1988) enabled us to sustain this reflexive endeavor and to keep a record of the ups, downs, and unforeseen turns of the course of the study as well as the difficulties we experienced when the “hold” we thought we had on our field of research became elusive or shaky. Finally, as a mediating tool for our own relationship to the object of our research, it also enabled us to go back to these experiences with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of probation, both as an apparatus and as a practice. We can then only regret that the usual format and codification of scientific publications give so little recognition to this reflective work – attentive to the dilemmas encountered, the hesitations, and the embarrassment felt – which is woven through the research process.

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Chapter 4

Silence of the Altars: Researching Sexual Abuse in Religious Institutions in Catalonia (Spain)



Marc Balcells  and Josep Maria Tamarit 

1 Introduction

The present chapter describes a research project conducted against all odds that wanted to assess clergymen's perceptions of child sexual abuse in Catalonia (Spain). Spain has been no exception to the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetrated by members of the Catholic Church. As in many other countries, the press called attention to this issue, and then a landslide of cases ensued. At an international level, the case of John Geoghan, a priest of the Archdiocese of Boston accused of sexually abusing some 130 minors over 30 years, was uncovered in 2002 by *The Boston Globe* (Terry, 2008a, b; The Boston Globe Spotlight Investigation, 2004). This case was a turning point in the research of this criminal phenomenon.

A difference from other countries is that the Catholic Church in Spain has decided not to cooperate with the government or academia to facilitate an assessment of the prevalence and incidence of cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by either diocesan priests or members of religious congregations. The direct result of this lack of cooperation has been that contrary to the American, Irish, or German experience, to name a few of them, this research project has suffered the lack of full access to documents and personnel, and thus to a plethora of data which remains untapped.

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2 The Problem of Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

CSA in the Catholic Church has been a matter of study for most researchers at an international level. Institutional commissions and academic teams have investigated this problem because of initiatives from public institutions (Ireland, Australia, or Belgium) or from the Catholic Church itself (United States, The Netherlands, Germany, or France) (see, for example, among others: Australian Royal Commission, 2017; Dreßing et al., 2019a, b; Family and Community Development Committee, 2013a, b; John Jay College, 2004, 2006; Ryan Report, 2009; among many others). In Spain, this was largely an under-researched area, due to a lack of initiatives such as those mentioned. Through a series of qualitative, quantitative, and legal studies, a team of researchers from three universities (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, University of Barcelona, and University of the Basque Country) have tried to fill this gap. We will present here one of these studies, focused on the perceptions of this phenomenon by a group of clergymen in Catalonia.

Most research conducted so far in various countries has adopted a perspective centered on individual or situational factors, while other studies have focused on institutional or organizational causes of CSA in religious settings. Reactions from the Catholic Church have been mostly oriented toward painting abuses as an individual problem resulting from psychological disorders in perpetrators. This attitude, interpreted as a “rotten apples” perception by White and Terry (2008), makes it difficult to have a complete view of the issue and to develop effective prevention. Numerous studies (Doyle, 2003; Keenan, 2012) have highlighted that beyond risk factors related to opportunity, some cultural and organizational features of the institution are key points to identify structural factors potentially generating some patterns of abuse.

Those structures are defined through a set of elements, being the most relevant are clericalism, isolation, autocratic power (unique authority), and lack of supervision and transparency, along with subcultural rules such as secrecy and a “team spirit.” Research has suggested that some young men are attracted to priesthood or religious life as a means of escaping from their anxiety or confusion about sexuality and sexual orientation that they perceive as deviant (Doyle, 2003; Keenan, 2012). A combination of opportunistic and structural factors generates for some clergymen with individual risk factors (mostly related to narcissism and psychosexual immaturity) adequate conditions for committing sexual abuse. Clericalism is conceived as an idealization of priesthood and of the sacral nature of the institutional Catholic Church and its moral authority. This cultural pattern is strongly related to a culture of secrecy, celibacy, and fear of scandal and to concepts of sin and confession: particularly the belief held by some religious leaders that CSA is above all a sin which can be absolved, rather than a crime that must be reported.

Based on these previous findings, our research questions have been oriented toward analyzing how nonaccused clergy perceive the problem of CSA committed within the Catholic Church and to explore cultural and institutional elements, as far as they can be considered as conducive to abuse. More specifically, and beyond

previous studies, we aimed to determine whether elements exist that allow us to find anomie within the Catholic Church, defined by a dissonance between the cultural goals and the institutional means suitable to achieve the idealistic objectives of the institution, an ecclesiastical subculture favorable to those who commit abuses, and a discourse linked to rationalization and neutralization of the perpetrators' criminal responsibility.

To properly target and design the objectives of the project, it was necessary to establish a proper assessment of available data regarding CSA perpetrated in the Catholic Church in Spain. The lack of statistics and other forms of data guided the project toward a qualitative angle. In Spain, only two in-depth studies about CSA have been conducted: the first one, in 1994, sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs (López, 1994), and a more recent one by Varona and Martínez (2015) that faced a low response (18 responses only) of both experts and victims. Precisely the latter highlights the lack of references on the Spanish context; the limited role of victims; and the high level of imprecision and fragmentation of pieces published by the media.

As it has already been mentioned, it must be acknowledged that the research project wanted to assess an untapped source such as clergymen not having been accused of CSA to evaluate their perception of this problem. To achieve the objectives, a qualitative avenue was adopted: to begin with, there were not enough statistics to employ. The lack of cooperation of the Catholic Church added to a lack of trust and its secretive nature made unviable the acquisition of valid and reliable data by outsiders; also, there was a lack of official statistics in Spain reflecting the prevalence and incidence of this phenomenon; and finally, a lack of critical mass of research regarding this issue also guided this research toward a qualitative stance. A qualitative angle can produce a specific image (albeit limited to a specific place and time) of trends, relations, and associations by highlighting processes experimented by the sample, the contexts, their conducts, and so on. The qualitative angle allows researchers to explore and understand the phenomenon of CSA in the context of the Catholic Church while primary data are being generated (Creswell, 2013).

3 Phases of Fieldwork

Taking a qualitative stance, however, in an environment such as the Catholic Church to research sexual abuse is, to say the least, extremely challenging. The researchers began to conform an intentional sample: the idea was to count on clergymen (both diocesan priests and members of religious orders), from many dioceses and religious orders as possible. To do so, and thanks to research assistants culled among the students of the criminology degree of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, a list of possible candidates to be interviewed was compiled. The study was based in Catalonia, and therefore, the list of candidates was created from publicly accessible information about clergymen available on websites from dioceses, religious orders, and religious schools. Because the research wanted to highlight the perception of

the phenomenon of CSA in the Catholic Church by nonaccused and convicted clergymen, there was no need for the members conforming the sample to have had any information of specific cases having occurred in their dioceses or religious congregations.

This first part of our research did not require many credentials and the list resulted in 121 candidates/key informants, and all of them were reached out to ask them to participate in the research through an interview. An Excel spreadsheet was created to record both information (name, surnames, whether it was a diocesan priest or a member of a religious order, among others) and all forms of contact with these possible participants (date of first email, date of first phone call, among others) to establish follow-ups. As the researchers estimated the response rate was not surprisingly very high: Out of 43 emails sent out to diocesan priests and 77 sent to members of 10 religious orders, most of them came unanswered, and therefore, a follow-up email was sent. But more precisely, out of 43 diocesan priests contacted, only 24 responded: 13 accepted to be interviewed, seven denied participating, and four requested additional information regarding the study. Even though information was given, not a single interview was conducted with them. Regarding members of religious orders, out of 77 clergymen contacted, only 14 responded: Two accepted to be interviewed, nine denied participating, and three requested further information regarding the study, yet once again, even though information was given, not a single interview was conducted with them. In addition, and intending to involve higher hierarchies, we contacted seven archdioceses to interview their bishops: only two of them responded to decline our invitation, and in the end, no bishop was interviewed.

In many instances, most of the negative responses to be interviewed were expressed through a lack of responses to our invitations to participate in this research project. Those who expressly refused our invitation argued that either they did not know about the issue or flatly stated they would rather not be involved in our study. Diocesan priests, more precisely, stated that they did lack the authority or competence to participate or lack of time. One of the responses would be a harbinger of a theme that would repeat itself in many interviews: a clergyman stated that he was surprised that our research focused only on religious institutions, moreover, when the problem is (he considered) more pervasive in other areas such as families or schools, to name a few. Another one replied with a document attached that was created by his diocese, adding that he believed there was nothing more to say as he believed that the document was enough as a study about this issue.

We also tried to make the study broader in scope and expand it to Spain: to do so, we decided to communicate via email with the highest Spanish ecclesiastical government body, the *Conferencia Episcopal Española* (Spanish Bishops' Conference). With the collaboration of this permanent institution made up of the Spanish Bishops for the joint exercise of some pastoral functions of the Spanish Episcopate, we would have been able to reach higher representatives of the Catholic Church in Spain while at the same time, we would have accessed a wider sample of clergymen located across the country. Once again, their response—via email as well—was to decline to participate in the study. Therefore, the study was designed mainly for

Catalonia, thus affecting the generalizability of the research (as it will be analyzed in the next section).

In sum, these first contacts clearly indicated that the lack of cooperation from the Catholic Church would make the project more difficult to execute. This low response rate, mostly from members of religious congregations, would dictate a second phase, which involved access to the field and the obtainment of credentials. We decided to contact the Union of Religious of Catalonia (URC, which stands for *Unió de Religiosos de Catalunya* in Catalan), a private organization comprised of clergymen from religious congregations in Catalonia. The main objectives of this organization are to seek knowledge and collaboration between the various institutes and congregations and to promote activities for the well-being of the religious men and women of Catalonia. The goal was twofold: not only to have more candidates for the interviews, but also to boost and level up candidates who were members of religious orders, which at the time were not equally represented in our sample of interviewees. It was also important because in Catalonia, most clergymen belong to religious congregations, and because most of the cases of CSA have occurred in those orders.

Three meetings were required for them to finally agree to collaborate with our project. The first meeting was conducted with all on the board, constituted by members of all religious congregations. During that meeting, we highlighted prior research and brought information on the issue of CSA and on our research project, and answered all the questions posed. It must be mentioned that at the time, the fact that the Catalan ombudsman was actively engaged in assessing cases of CSA and all the media attention garnered by the research project were matters of concern to the members of the board. We decided to allay their fears (of us being there to unearth any possible cases and harm their reputation) by stating that we were researchers, and we just wanted to be objective, and highlighting the fact that in other countries the Church had requested this collaboration with academia and by explaining our role and duties as researchers. These meetings were eminently pragmatic with no other goal than to establish rapport with members of the organization. In this exchange of information when getting to know each other, no questions regarding the researchers' religion were posed by informants, even though later these issues appeared. It must be mentioned that we did not enter the field with extensive preparation on theological and ecclesial issues beyond those intrinsically basic and others acquired after reading about the key issues related to the field of research. Specifically, test-driving the questionnaire with members of the organization helped fine tune it.

A second informative meeting, attended only by two researchers and a small group of board members, helped to shorten the gap between both parties and to finally agree to participate; during that meeting—organized by request of the clergymen—they informed us about some key aspects of the organization of the Catholic Church and their religious orders they considered we should know. Their concern was that our questions might not be factual enough when it came to issues such as commandments or the pardon of sins. The fact that time had passed and the clergymen had time to reflect on their role made this meeting more productive, and

they even gifted us with some coffee table books edited by them, which was taken as a sign of improvement of the relationship between both parties. All the meetings were conducted in rooms where we could sit comfortably in circles or around a table and talk: mostly, the members of the organization were interested in the research. No other issues such as legal liabilities were discussed. A third meeting was scheduled as a follow-up to the previous one, with the idea to test the interview and give the researchers feedback on the questions asked with two of the members of the URC (one from the board and a second person from another religious congregation). After these three meetings (around three hours each, approximately), we earned our credentials as researchers: We did not only obtain the collaboration of the association in the research project but also dissemination among its members. Of course, the members of religious orders were free to participate or not, and we managed only to interview six clergymen from different religious orders. We were aware of a background check by members of the organization, as they mentioned in the meetings some previous statements we made to the media. In any case, this check (which in part we expected) did not affect our relationship with them.

The fact that after gaining trust and the credentials to be in the field, only six clergymen volunteered spoke volumes about both their fears and the need for cooperation between the Catholic Church and the academia. About the former, their main motive for not wanting to participate was mistrust, mostly due to journalistic reporting of cases. Members of religious orders considered these pieces of news aggressive toward them and sensationalistic. They also felt discriminated when compared to cases of CSA in other spheres, such as those happening in schools or within families.

In the end, 20 clergymen composed the final sample: all of them male among which 12 of them diocesan were priests from six different dioceses; and eight of them members of seven different religious congregations. Of the latter, four were provincial or equivalent positions in their congregation in the territory of Catalonia. Of the total number of people interviewed, at the time of the interview, 18 were priests, eight were rectors of parishes, three were judicial vicars, one was an episcopal vicar, two were school directors, three were priests attached to parishes, and one (the only layperson of the sample), who was responsible for the protection of minors in an order's school. Their ages were between 42 and 83 years old, with an average of 56.9 years old. All of them were clergymen for a long time, between 23 and 58 years, with an average of 35 years as priests. As in many qualitative studies, all the key informants understood the purpose of this research project. However, it cannot be ruled out that subjects from the sample had flawed or biased memories, or that their perceptions were conditioned emotionally. In any case, it cannot be asserted that these biases have been fully eliminated from the analysis.

Role wise, the nature of the five researchers' relationship with the participants was of the interviewer and interviewee. Participants always knew our professional background, as there was no necessity to hide it. As months passed and interviews were conducted, our role never evolved from the position of an outsider: That is, we never went beyond our position as scholars interviewing clergymen about the issue of CSA. It must be highlighted that all female researchers were accepted as equals

in all instances: At least in our research project, the gender of the interviewer did not have any impact. Even though we met with them and explained to them in person our research, the fact that we were laymen and women outside the Church inquiring about a very sensitive topic that has been long silenced in our country has always been an obstacle. As an example, interviewees often commented that they could not understand the interest of our research in CSA within the Catholic Church when we should be focusing on families or schools, and were wary that, like (in their opinion) journalists, we were there to discover secrets and write sensationalistic headlines. Several interviewees made explicit the strong impact on them caused by the social response to CSA, claiming to suffer from stigmatization that they interpreted as a form of victimization. For example, some respondents stated that “You find yourself walking down the street and people are looking at you as if they are judging you or there is writing on the front of the church ‘pedophiles,’” “We are privately prosecuted because we are victims!”; or “The media presents us as predators. People distrust our schools, our activities. I’m scared. No child will ever enter this office alone.”

The COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown halted the interviews, and it was decided afterwards to stop the data collection phase. Once the research was concluded (at the time, we had both published an article in English and a book chapter in Spanish), and to provide feedback with the results to the informants, we created a four-page leaflet that was sent to all participants: it contained the main objectives of the research project, its importance, the methodology, the main results, the conclusions, and some policy proposals. Moreover, once the book was published, we gave a copy as a gift to one of our respondents for his kind assistance. Until now, no further contact has been made with our respondents (see next epigraph for validity and reliability strengthening techniques). It must be mentioned that our study had an impact on the Spanish media, attracting the attention of several media outlets: this impact in part lies in the fact that this issue began to have political traction in the nation. As insofar this is the only study conducted with church members, we cannot assess whether media attention could have an impact in future research regarding participation of clergymen.

4 Techniques Employed

A total of 20 interviews were finally conducted by a team of five researchers located in different areas of Catalonia. These interviews ranged in duration between one and two hours and were conducted between April 2019 and March 2020. The date should resonate with the reader. As Spain went into lockdown, some potentially scheduled interviews (sadly, one of them with a clergyman from a religious congregation that came under heavy media attention in the previous years and took a lot of time convincing to accept to be interviewed) were canceled. Due to the sensitive topic, the interviewees would rather not be interviewed online, and follow-up communications went unanswered. Most of the interviews were conducted in spaces

which felt safe for interviewees; always spaces belonging to the church, such as offices at the parochial houses, religious orders or schools, and chosen by them. Nineteen of the interviews were done using Catalan, while one was done in Castilian Spanish. In some instances where the informant did not desire to be recorded, two interviewers were present to ensure the reliability of the data. However, most interviews were one-on-one.

Before starting the interviews, the interviewees could read an informed consent document in which they accepted to participate in our study. We did inform them of the name of the lead researcher; that the research project was officially approved by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness; issues of confidentiality and anonymity; and regarding the recording, only one of the interviewees declined to be recorded and a second member of the research team assisted in note taking. Respondents were informed that interviews would be transcribed and, once transcribed, destroyed; once analyzed, the transcriptions would also be destroyed. Both the interviewee and the researcher conducting the interview had to sign the form, and each one retained a copy. We decided that in case an informant would have informed us of a specific instance of abuse that would not be expired we would tell him that we are legally forced to report it to a prosecutorial office: however, no such thing happened.

Our data recollection revolved around the semi-structured interview. Due to the lack of previous experiences, we created a short questionnaire, yet we allowed ourselves and the respondents to deviate and explore further topics that they considered important when needed: That way, interviewees could talk freely about their experiences on perceptions of CSA while at the same time raise topics that might have not been asked otherwise. The questionnaire had 20 questions distributed in five thematic blocks: the first gathered basic information about the interviewees such as age, position, and years passed since ordination or entrance to the congregation, among others. The second block comprised questions regarding the perception of the problem such as “Are you aware of instances of CSA?”, “Do you think that the allegations are generally true?”, “Do you discuss these issues with other members of the clergy?”, or “How does this sort of news make you feel?”. A third block referred to the perception of risk factors by interviewees: based on relevant literature, questions clustered around organizational issues (“Do you think that there are organizational aspects of the church that favor the commission of abuses?”), sexual issues (“Do you think the Church’s attitude toward sexuality should change?”), or the sacrament of reconciliation (“Can the sacrament of reconciliation help justify CSA if it is too easy to obtain forgiveness?”). The fourth and penultimate block dealt with the responses to CSA by the Church, asking questions such as “Do you think that the Church gives an adequate answer to the issue?” or “In other countries, bishops have taken initiatives such as engaging in reparation procedures for victims or participating in public commissions: what do you think?”. A final block closed the interviews, allowing respondents to bring to the table issues they considered relevant and a snowballing question in case it could be useful for recruiting new participants.

Block number three of the questionnaire was the one which had more references to theological issues, which, at the same time, have been linked to the problem of CSA in the Catholic Church. To our research, a pivotal question was to what extent all sins can be pardoned and whether pardoning is far too easy. In a meeting held on December 4, 2019, with some board members of the URC, we were given insight on these issues, and a brainstorm ensued to better pose the questions regarding sins. Some proposed fine-tuned questions were: “Does the sacrament of forgiveness help the healing of the penitent?”, “Can the sacrament of forgiveness help to justify making forgiveness too easy?”, “Does it facilitate real repair?”, “The ease of obtaining forgiveness can be an element that facilitates a relapse?”, or “Would you contemplate the sacrament of forgiveness as a mechanism to neutralize this type of conduct?” As stated previously, that impacted positively in both parts: clergymen from the URC knew better the process of research and felt engaged, while we ended with more accurate questions. Their interest was none other than to collaborate in a study once they had overcome their reluctance. Later it became clear that some of them (in positions of responsibility) were looking for answers to the phenomenon to know how to act better.

Data Processing and Analysis

Most of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim in the language employed by the participants. For the article published in English (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022), the quoted interviewee’s citations were translated to English with no correction of grammar, to avoid inadvertently altering the meaning. A professional translation service was then used to ensure maximum fidelity, and we cross-checked with a translator some specific passages to ensure complete fidelity to original quotes. When using quotations in the articles and chapter, we would identify those by stating whether these came from a diocesan priest or someone belonging to a religious order and our code that linked the quotation to the interviewee (as in: DP#1, RO#2, and so on).

After transcribing the interviews, we proceeded to data analysis. We began by aligning analytic categories with each one of the project’s research questions, and the same categories were used to code the data and to present the findings. Analysis followed an open-axial-selective order (Creswell, 2013; Kraska & Neuman, 2008). We decided to use a simple Excel spreadsheet to create the data matrix, due to the low number of interviews, thus disregarding qualitative data-analysis software. In the open coding stage of the analysis, the codes developed over time. In the axial coding phase, codes were filed under four category headings, which seemed to best represent the common themes shared by groups of coded data. In the selective coding phase, the relationship with the axial codes was examined, so the connections between codes could be explained.

We then proceeded to analyze data separately without conferral until a second phase when the whole process and the results were discussed jointly. A third researcher acting as an arbiter was available in case of disagreement during the process. However, we never resorted to this figure, as the interviewees’ responses were clear enough to be interpreted equally by both researchers (except for minor

disagreements on specific responses that were sorted out after careful consideration). Last, transcribed quotations considered important were also included in the data matrix, to articulate themes that once linked could collectively both analyze the phenomenon of CSA perpetrated by members of the Catholic Church and answer the research questions.

To strengthen validity, memos were incorporated, creating an audit trail on information gathered during the interviews beyond statements of the interviewees; for example, reactions or ways of behaving of interviewees were jotted down. Memos, considered rich data, also have an impact on the reliability of results as it adds another layer of documentation demonstrating how themes were used consistently throughout.

5 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

We did not send our proposal to the university ethics research committee, as we did not consider it necessary. The decision was taken based on the lack of factors raising red flags: on one hand, the interviewees were not victims or perpetrators, nor minors, nor any special population that needed any special precaution; on the other, the issues covered were not personal. Therefore, we decided to adhere to ethical standards present in any qualitative research, being informed consent and privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Informants were all adults and accepted to participate after having been briefed about the study. They signed an informed consent form, which specifically stated how the interview was anonymous and confidential, as well as data treatment (destruction of recordings and transcripts once the project concluded). There was no recollection of personal data nor dissemination afterwards (during conferences or in chapters and scientific articles) regarding location or religious order that allow for the identification of the interviewee. In sum, we behaved in the way we understood was more ethical and appropriate. To ensure the maintenance of these standards, we maintained ongoing communications between the two authors and the five members of the study that assisted us with interviews.

The fact that most clergymen contacted refused to participate is an indicator of the difficulties and worries that they found regarding the problem intended to approach. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics dealt with in the interviews, we approached the participating clergymen and those who hesitated with care and time enough to create the best conditions to gain confidence toward the researchers and the objectives of the study. We have concluded that reluctance to participate was not only a consequence of individual barriers, but also the effect of a negative attitude of the ecclesial authorities regarding any initiative that considered sexual abuses in the Church as a matter of interest. An indicator of this was that diocesan priests were, in general terms, more willing to be interviewed than members of religious congregations, those being more subjected to the orders from their superiors. All bishops contacted refused to be interviewed; some provincials of religious orders agreed to participate, after various meetings carried out to explain to them the aims

of the study and enhance mutual confidence between the researcher and the participants.

The interviews have revealed the profound impact that cases of CSA in the Catholic Church have on members of this institution, particularly because of the dissemination of those cases through the media. Most of the respondents expressed a diversity of feelings, including empathy toward the victims of abuse and a certain ambiguity toward the perpetrators. Shame and stigmatization were also feelings that appeared among almost all participants. They expressed their concerns as members of a human group which has been exposed to strong public scrutiny and labeled because of such an aversive image as a representative of God and of the sacred associated with sexual abuse of children, probably the most blamed manifestation of deviant behavior. Managing these feelings and the difficulties of expressing them was a big challenge for this study.

One of the emotional challenges we had to deal with was the closeness of the respondents to those members of the institution who committed abuses, considered as brothers. Even accepting the need to report cases to the criminal justice system and the need for punishing the abusers as a public crime, they tend to perceive the potential abusers (the questions posed were not related to known real abusers) as sinners who deserve human support and pardon from a moral standpoint, not only wrongdoers deserving punishment. This ambivalence, although it can be considered rational and understandable, can be emotionally shocking and needs to be correctly managed by researchers. A dimension of such ambivalent attitude is the coexistence of a feeling of being victimized as a member of a group who is socially blamed and a feeling of empathy for the victims who are recognized, in general terms, as innocent and required for support.

In addition, we have observed in the responses the plurality of sensitivities existing in the institution and the evolution concerning the official position of the Catholic Church that has occurred lately. This evolution was perceived in aspects such as the recognition of abuses, the awareness that CSA is not only a sin against the sixth commandment but also a crime with serious consequences for the affected persons and the claim for a firm response from the institution. Differences in attitudes were mediated by generational gap, among others.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

The present study has contributed to gaining knowledge about a dimension that has been neglected when we look at the research carried out on the problem of CSA in the Catholic Church: how the problem is perceived and lived in the core of the institution, based on an in-depth hearing to a group of clergymen which have not been involved in cases of abuse. An ambivalent narrative was observed, which included, on the one hand, reluctance to recognize CSA as a specific issue of the Catholic Church and, on the other hand, perception of the uniqueness and seriousness of sexual abuse as an expression of abuse of spiritual power. Beyond the ambivalence,

in various thematic areas (celibacy, the sacrament of confession, or sexuality), it was possible to identify a discourse tending to idealization, with the consequent dualism between reality and moral principles and ideals. We have interpreted this dissonance as an indication of a situation of anomie produced by the difficulty of achieving high ideals, given the insufficient institutional means available to achieve cultural objectives. This insufficiency has mainly appeared related to loneliness, experienced above all by diocesan priests, and the lack of support and supervision. The systematic avoidance of words that express the issue directly (in particular, the naming “sexual abuse”) can also be interpreted as an indicator of a tendency to dissociate from a reality that profoundly challenges moral idealism and sacredness.

In addition, it was possible to confirm the existence of certain neutralization techniques, such as denial of responsibility and condemnation of the condemners, in line with the findings by Spraitz and Bowen (2016), although not to the point of considering that they denote the existence of a cultural context conducive to or non-reactive to abuse. Neutralization was essentially focused on denial of the institution’s responsibility, with some interviewees perceiving CSA as a matter of individual causes (according to the idea of rotten apples), and, to a lesser extent, on denial of the responsibility of the perpetrators. Regarding the existence of a subculture, no elements were identified as sufficiently indicative of an ecclesial subculture constituted by values or beliefs that generate conditions conducive to the emergence or persistence of CSA, beyond an emotional closeness to those who committed abuses considered as brothers and a feeling of being victimized as a member of a group, in terms of the team spirit described by White and Terry (2008). The interviews reflected the evolution that has occurred in the institutional response to the problem, with certain aspects denoting some resistance to addressing institutional change.

The findings extracted from the interviews confirm the results of previous studies conducted at an international level. Moral perfectionism is a key element of the ecclesial structure (Keenan, 2012), as the Church requires that the lives of clergy constitute a model of spiritual life and of commitment to the institution and its values. In this requirement for purity, celibacy is a key element that cannot be separated from the sacral conception of priesthood. The idealization and overrating of celibacy, featured as a superhuman quality of the sacred, have been recently found to be relevant factors in France by the Rapport on sexual violence in the Catholic Church (CIASE, 2021). Loneliness and weak human ties are recognized as risk factors for CSA, as shown by the fact that, in most countries, the prevalence of abuse by diocesan priests is higher than for members of religious orders, for whom life in a community is a protective factor. The lack of support for clergy and the lack of mechanisms to compensate for loneliness cause anxiety and frustration, leading some individuals to disaffection with objectives and to a consequent attachment to more ritualized aspects that constitute a fundamental element of ecclesiastical activity (Doyle, 2003; White & Terry, 2008).

On this basis, we have found in the informants’ narrative various elements that characterize a situation that can be defined, in general terms, as anomic (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022), such as expressive references to moralistic preaching, lack of

control, and the emphasis on the relationship between loneliness and spiritual power. Anomie may have been reinforced by the lack of an institutional response to CSA. According to all studies carried out to date, nonresponse has long been an attitude of most bishops and, to a lesser extent, of those responsible for religious congregations. Denial of the facts has deepened the tendency to dissociate between the reality of human behavior and moral idealism. This dissociation may also have been favored by the concepts of sin and confession, especially if the tendency toward a trivialization of confession and forgiveness of sins is considered. While at the dogmatic level, the Church has shown a rightist approach in the conception of the sacrament (with requirements such as contrition, examination of conscience, repentance, and the purpose of amendment), the penitential practice of Catholicism has generally been much less rigorous, provoking some of the fiercest criticisms from the Protestant reform movement and, later, reproaches as to the double standards that have prevailed in countries of greater Catholic influence.

The study has also contributed to gaining understanding on the impact of the changes that have occurred in the institution after the Vatican Council II and the process of secularization, which has been fast in Spain. The responses of the informants revealed some tensions derived from these changes, such as the gap between the negative image of sexuality rooted in the institution and the evolution of society, or the lack of controlling mechanisms (for example, proper supervision) within the institution. This is a sign of the dissonance between the cultural goals and the institutional structures within the Church, which can be considered, to a large extent, to be inherent to organizational practices established since at least the Middle Ages, but it has been further intensified in times of crisis and transformation, when the pressure on individuals increased.

We have learned that qualitative research can make a useful contribution to improving our understanding of a phenomenon that challenges profound social expectations and requires from researchers a complete vision of the problem. The present study has made us aware of the necessity of further research into the present functioning of the structures of the Catholic Church to acquire a greater understanding of the causes of CSA and, from there, to be able to properly guide the reforms. Data on CSA prevalence and characteristics, provided by studies carried out in various countries, including the USA, Australia, Ireland, Germany, and France, reveal a common pattern. The percentage of clergy who have committed abuses is at least 3% (CIASE, 2021) and in most studies beyond 4%, which makes it unreasonable to expect that the issue can be attributed to rotten apples or even to situational causes. An in-depth study should include a social examination of the characteristics of the clergy, including their social origin, childhood experiences, training (seminars), and social relationships, as potentially providing information useful for designing prevention, selection, and training plans.

By way of conclusions, we need to stress that institutional sexual abuse (and, particularly, CSA in the Catholic Church) is related not only to individual risk factors, to opportunity, or to aspects related to the selection or training of clergy. The challenge lies in accepting that the issue needs to be addressed in all its dimensions. To reduce the tension existing between cultural goals and institutional means,

institutional reforms are necessary in terms of reviewing and deconsecrating cultural goals and improving adaptation of institutional means, while also focusing on supporting clerics and reducing loneliness. A debate must be normalized inside institutions on all the issues raised in this research, related to moralism, clerical power, and celibacy, among others.

This study has also been an exciting experience that can point the way toward more ambitious and comprehensive studies centered on the intersection of the main religious traditions. Further empirical investigations are needed to ascertain to what extent the unachievable standards set forth by purity culture can operate as a risk factor of abuse in religious environments. The idea that “Christian purity culture normalizes sexual violence” (Graybill et al., 2019) can be perceived as a provocation or as an assertion consistent with our reflections about the anomic institutional culture that needs to be verified by further research, not only as a particularity of the Catholic Church and of the Christian environments but also as a feature of sexual abuse existing in other religions (Rashid & Barron, 2019).

Regarding methodological challenges, we must highlight the limitation intrinsic to qualitative research, in terms of lack of representativeness of the sample. Beyond this, we must bear in mind the large number of invited clergymen who did not answer or refused to participate; hence, it is important to be aware that the opinions collected and analyzed are just those of the respondents. Another limitation is the lack of response of the Catholic Church at the institutional level. These limitations have not prevented the objectives of the present study from being achieved, but there is still a correlation between the lack of participation of the institution as an affected and involved part and access to a critical mass of primary data, both quantitative and qualitative. Finally, it must be highlighted that the perception of clergy not involved in sexual abuses is only an indirect way to approach a problem whose main actors are those who committed abuses, the affected persons and, in a different dimension, those responsible for preventing crime and responding to it. It is crucial for future research in Spain about CSA in the Catholic Church to achieve collaborations and synergies like those in other States, to carry out studies of greater depth and scope.

We must acknowledge two reasons that justify the validity of the research project: on the one hand, the fact that qualitative research does not involve obtaining representative samples. As Flick (1998) stated, it is about the relevance of the researched sample what determines the way the persons are selected for the study. This has been a pivotal point to this research project. Hence, qualitative research gravitates toward nonrepresentative sampling techniques: in our case, and stated before, we decided to look for a purposive sampling involving specifically profiled subject (clergymen) members of a difficult to reach population. This reason, added to the fact that we did not receive any sort of cooperation from the Catholic Church, highlights the need to keep researching in this field: any small step will help.

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Chapter 5

Studying the Military: Unlocking a Closed Organization



Rut Diamint and Rafa Martínez 

1 Introduction

The study of military-related issues is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, scholars have delved into the intricacies of warfare, seeking to understand its causes and consequences. The inherent contradictions of political power and the disputed borders that serve as its realm have fueled the use of war as a central instrument and foundation of authority. However, our approach has always been more modest. As social scientists, specifically a sociologist (Rut Diamint) and a political scientist (Rafa Martínez), our focus diverges from that of historians. Coming from different backgrounds, with the first of us hailing from Argentina and the second from Spain, both our countries have experienced prolonged and painful military-led authoritarian regimes, our interest lies not in historiographical narratives or political power struggles that culminate in armed conflict. Instead, we are captivated by the military as an entity and its implications in various contexts.

Specifically, our research has focused for years on how to ensure that the military relinquishes political power and becomes an administrative tool at the service of any democratic government. This is important because, even with the expansion of democracy, various practices, norms, discourses, and behaviors have remained tinged with militarism. As researchers, we have also been interested in what the military institution is like and in analyzing whether the members of the military are primarily characterized by a vocational or by an institutional profile, among other aspects. In recent years, elements such as international missions have aroused our interest. Recent changes in the international political system have led us also to look

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ahead to the future of the Armed Forces and to analyze the marked trend toward multitasking.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the challenges associated with studying defense issues and to share our experiences and the obstacles we encountered while examining the military question in Latin America and Spain. Despite not having collaborated on joint research before, we are familiar with each other's work and have gained valuable insights from each other's achievements and setbacks. Rut Diamint began her interaction with and study of the military during the 1980s, amidst the third wave of democratization in the region. Throughout this period, she actively participated in numerous seminars, conferences, and meetings alongside fellow academics, diplomats, defense officials, and military personnel from democratic countries. Together, they sought to navigate this delicate journey, particularly in the aftermath of military dictatorships, and find a path forward. This vast experience was of great use to her and led to her collaborating with Argentine defense ministers in the early 1990s (as advisor, 1993–1995), and then in the first decade of the twenty-first century (chief of staff, 2003–2005).

In 2002, the Argentine army contracted a public opinion polling company to conduct a sociological analysis of its members in connection with the shift from compulsory to voluntary military service. The company shared the data with Rut on the condition that they not be made public. Thanks to these data, she was able to obtain information about a broad population of military personnel; specifically, this involved a self-administered survey of a representative sample of Argentine Army cadre personnel (6000 cases), a survey of a panel of opinion leaders (240 interviews), and a survey aimed at a nationally representative sample of public opinion (1278 cases). The most striking fact was the social class of the new officers and non-commissioned officers, which showed a decline in the socio-economic level of military members. No other similar studies were carried out in the rest of Latin America, or at least there is no public record of any such studies.

Due to the limitations of conducting direct fieldwork, she undertook a project aimed at training civilians in defense subjects. With the support of the Ford Foundation, three workshops were organized to provide training to Latin American civilians in defense matters. These workshops were conducted in different regions, including Mexico and Central America, the Andean Region, and the Southern Cone (Diamint, 1999). In addition to this project, she also collaborated with NDI (Partnership for Democratic Governance and Security) on another initiative. The objectives of these projects were to analyze the knowledge requirements for civilians in security issues, provide training to parliamentary and party leaders in security oversight, and study defense policy budgeting and management. Her doctoral thesis from 2013, titled "*La política de defensa argentina en democracia: juridicidad y desmilitarización*" (Argentine Defense Policy in Democracy: Legality and Demilitarization), further contributed to her specialization in this field. Her expertise was also enhanced through her roles as an adviser (1993–1995) and Chief of Cabinet (2004–2005) at the Ministry of Defense of Argentina.

Rafa Martínez embarked on his research on the military at the dawn of the twenty-first century with a groundbreaking survey. This survey involved collecting

data from 2500 students of the 32 military training centers for officers and non-commissioned officers in Spain's three armies (Army, Navy, and Air Force) and the common defense corps (military corps that are shared by all the branches of the Spanish Armed Forces providing specific professional expertise: legal assistance, audit and accountability, medical personnel, and military bands). It was a unique opportunity. The project was funded by the recently established "General Gutiérrez Mellado" University Institute (1997) as part of an agreement set up by the Spanish Ministry of Defense and the National University of Distance Education (UNED). Taking advantage of the significant research funding available at the institute during that time, Rafa adopted a daring approach by seeking permission to access all military academies and conducting surveys among the cadets. This request was deemed impossible, but it turned out to be a catalyst for an eye-opening journey. When years later, Rafa asked an relevant admiral about why they obtained that grant, the response shed light on their decision: -Because no one had ever asked for anything like that before. This valuable lesson taught Rafa not to limit himself as long as his approach was scientifically sound. Ultimately, in 2007, this project's findings came to fruition with the publication of his work (Martínez, 2007), marking the culmination of an exciting journey filled with both rewarding and disappointing experiences.

A presentation of this work in Baltimore (USA) at the Inter-University Seminar (IUS) on Armed Forces and Society led him to Giuseppe Caforio and the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS). The initial collaboration involved comparing the census survey in Spanish academies with sample data of cadets from a contemporary study of the ERGOMAS military profession working group (Caforio & Martínez, 2005). This collaboration resulted in three research projects involving 13, 9, and 8 countries, respectively. The first project encompassed the administration of over 3000 questionnaires to future civilian and military elites; surveying first- and final-year students of the military academies of the three armies; and first- and final-year students of the three university bachelor degrees held by the largest number of ministers, namely, Law, Economics, and Political Science. Additionally, almost a hundred in-depth interviews were conducted with military, political, business, journalistic, and academic elites (Caforio, 2007). The second project involved conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with more than 500 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, focusing on their involvement in asymmetric warfare (Caforio, 2013). This was complemented by a further survey in which we again conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews on the same topic with 250 senior commanders and generals (Nunciari & Olivetta, 2021).

In 2010, Narcís Serra, former vice-president and defense minister of the Spanish government (who would later prove to be a key gatekeeper) put Rafa in contact with Rut and the entire Latin American Security and Defence Network (RESDAL). The objective of that approach was to contact the governments of the Southern Cone of Latin America and to replicate the study that had been previously conducted in Spanish military academies in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. However, when the project was about to start, the defense minister of one of those countries was removed from office, resulting in the project falling apart after six months of preparation. Despite the setback, the negotiations with those ministers and their

respective staff provided valuable insights and lessons for future initiatives on how to negotiate with the gatekeepers and access the field.

The latest research project in this area is “Rethinking the role of the Armed Forces in the face of new security challenges” (REPENFAS21), which Rafa has been leading since 2019. The project is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and aims to analyze how the Spanish Armed Forces should adapt to address the redefined risks and threats to security in both Spain and Europe. As part of the project, a total of 60 members of the political, economic, and military elites were interviewed. This included surveying almost 100 colonels undergoing their course to become generals, as well as engaging with the defense committees of the Spanish Congress and Senate.

The results were discussed in three dedicated workshops involving 21 experts from various backgrounds (academics, journalists, consultants, and politicians). Each workshop had seven participants. Additionally, a Delphi method questionnaire was administered to gather insights from an additional 30 experts. Although not strictly research work, the recent fieldwork experience with military personnel was the culmination of years of studies and research. In March 2023, Rafa was appointed as an expert consultant to the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). His role involved conducting workshops on security system reform. While the experience was highly valuable, unfortunately, the desired outcome was not achieved.

The process of achieving democratic civilian control over the Armed Forces and holding them accountable for their actions was viewed by members of this institution as a threat to their identity. Whenever the issue of separating the civilian and military spheres was raised to strengthen the new civilian regimes, the military often responded with annoyance or arrogance. Although we have always endeavored to adhere to a scientific methodology and rigor, we must acknowledge that both authors have openly expressed their opinions regarding the role of the military in Latin America and Spain. While some may perceive this as a bias that undermines the objectivity of our research findings, we maintain a different standpoint. We recognize the presence of underlying assessments, as identified by Murillo Ferrol (1963). It is crucial to acknowledge their existence, as overlooking them can potentially influence the outcome of an investigation.

Social scientists study a world inherently shaped by their own perspectives and viewpoints, making it challenging to approach their research object with a completely neutral perspective. However, if we proactively acknowledge this reality and conduct our work in a manner that upholds scientific rigor without compromising it, we can still achieve successful outcomes. Both authors are unequivocally committed to democratic values and we have always sought to ensure that our research can inform public policies and political decisions that can initiate or consolidate transitions to democracy, or facilitate a better understanding of the role of the Armed Forces in a democratic state. We clearly approached the military from the post-positivism. Although we clearly pursue objectivity, we recognize the possible effects of biases, as many times we have approached individuals and an organization that—generally speaking—has committed crimes against humankind and supported for

decades regimes where civil liberties were not respected. Perhaps, Rut's publications (Diamint, 2003, 2006, 2018) can serve as a recount of some of the unpleasant or complicated experiences encountered during our commitment to the democratization of the Armed Forces.

2 Access to the Field

Unlike other public institutions, the Armed Forces hold a unique position as the primary tool for the state to exert its monopoly on violence and societal control (Bruneau & Matei, 2012; Pion-Berlin & Martínez, 2017). The military possesses the authority to classify certain matters as secret in the interest of national security, and here lies the temptation for the Armed Forces to utilize this classification privilege as a means of protecting themselves against intrusive scrutiny by academics. Moreover, possible career jeopardy, fear of exposing repression, or simply the lack of a democratic culture of accountability also contribute to the military authorities' profound suspicion of individuals outside the Armed Forces. In addition to these challenges, researchers exploring non-mainstream areas often encounter inherent skepticism and mistrust from those in uniform, further adding to the obstacles that need to be overcome. In addition to this, those researchers who study the military field can also be labeled as "friendly academics" serving the interests of whoever funds their research. Alternatively, our investigations are sometimes considered unnecessary by the Armed Forces, as well as by many of our peers and society. At best, they fail to comprehend why we invest our time in this demanding, unproductive, and seemingly irrelevant subject matter. If there are no longer any coups d'état, they question the need for such concern and effort.

Both researchers have gained access to the field, formal and informal alike, in various research projects. The work conducted over the last 30 years has established a sense of trust and reliability with the military, which has facilitated the process of obtaining authorizations and granted us access to a broader spectrum of military and political organizations. This access was not an easy or fast process, which may be a major drawback for young researchers who do not have enough time to develop these links. Despite our experience in social research practice, gaining access to such an apprehensive and closed universe demanded the development of different strategies. We discovered them either intuitively through trial and error or by following the advice of other researchers from the Armed Forces or related agencies such as the police or intelligence services (Soeters et al., 2014; Carreiras et al., 2016; Díaz-Fernández, 2005). It is worth noting that valuable precedents existed among Spanish and Latin American pieces (Agüero, 1995; Benítez Manaut, 2014; Busquets Bragulat, 1984; Diamint, 2003; Fuentes, 2009; Rial, 1990); however, in comparison, the existing literature on the US military, for instance, was much more extensive and often of higher quality (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Kohn, 1997).

Undertaking rigorous, scientific, and systematic research on military affairs in our regions has often been hindered by numerous obstacles. These challenges were

even greater considering that Rut is a woman whose work has a social, critical, and social science focus, and Rafa is an academic from a university in Catalonia, Spain, a region where, due to tensions related to independence, researchers studying Spanish federal administration receive significant criticism. Rut's initial research study (Diamint, 1999) on the Armed Forces focused on the transition to democracy in Argentina and aimed to examine the persistent authoritarian legacies within the newly established democratic system. However, conducting interviews with military personnel proved to be extremely challenging. She faced resistance and was not welcomed by many. Even when some individuals agreed to participate, the hierarchical structure of the Armed Forces hindered the provision of truthful responses, particularly from lower-ranking officers. Over time, she managed to establish connections with a few young officers who were willing to engage in discussions. Nevertheless, she was unable to conduct a comprehensive statistical study of the military population.

2.1 The Gatekeepers

The military is intimately familiar with the institution on a daily basis and possesses deep knowledge from within. In contrast, academics often appear as outsiders with a limited understanding of military affairs, attempting to impose oversimplified notions or even biases and unattainable perceived standards. Rafa has always made efforts to initiate his projects through official channels and clearly communicate the research objectives to the organization. Without prior authorization, the studies would face potential roadblocks and likely be vetoed. That is the reason why, whenever possible, he enlisted the help of gatekeepers who could facilitate access and remove barriers. For instance, in the 1998 study, the recently established "Gutiérrez Mellado" University Institute played a crucial role in providing direct access to the Directorate General for Defense Policy of the Spanish Ministry of Defense.

In the REPENFAS21 project, initiated in 2019, having direct access to the civilian chief of staff of the Minister of Defense proved as well to be instrumental in gaining support and cooperation. Through a mutual friend, Rafa obtained the chief of staff's email address and reached out to introduce himself, explain his previous research, and request a meeting to discuss the project's requirements. After a month, Rafa had the opportunity to meet him in Madrid, although the meeting was frequently interrupted by telephone calls. This experience highlighted the challenges faced by the chief of staff in managing the ministry's agenda and emphasized the importance of being clear, concise, and direct when presenting research proposals and communicating needs to the gatekeeper. Despite the interruptions, Rafa managed to effectively convey the progress of the study conducted so far, articulate what he could offer, and outline his objectives. Within a short time, all the necessary authorizations, interview arrangements, and even a portion of the requested funding were obtained. An essential factor contributing to this swift resolution was the

positive references that Rafa's projects had received from the "Gutiérrez Mellado" Institute, with which a strong and fruitful relationship had been cultivated since 1998.

It is worth noting that these alliances and connections are built over decades and require continuous nurturing and reinforcement. However, connections with gatekeepers must be continuously updated. When senior civilian officials acquire a sufficient level of knowledge and expertise in defense matters, they are often reassigned to other areas of responsibility. Additionally, a change in the governing party can trigger their replacement. This is why it is essential to build trust not only with political officials but also with military officials within the Defense structures, as the latter tend to remain in the organization for longer periods of time.

Negotiating access is also a process of identifying what can be of interest to the participants and facilitating their willingness to take part in our study. In the 1998 project, questions made in our questionnaires on the role of women in the Armed Forces and on the recruitment of foreigners into the military, known to have been answered favorably, facilitated the adoption of policies in this regard. As an example, women had just been integrated into the Armed Forces in 1998, and the study demonstrated that there was good acceptance by the cadets of their integration into combat missions. Moreover, the study revealed that there were some recruitment difficulties, and citizens from Latin-American countries were seen as a potential source of personnel. The study also showed that the cadets' main concern was the quality of working conditions of the military personnel. Therefore, it is crucial to provide relevant and valuable feedback to our gatekeepers and the responsible individuals within military and political organizations. However, if the researcher is perceived as an uncomfortable parasite solely interested in extracting information from them, and in the worst-case scenario, interfering with their analysis, they will be unwilling to provide any data or grant access. However, sometimes what was initially considered a mutually beneficial arrangement abruptly changes. Rafa still remembers the request made by a senior commander who was unexpectedly promoted. He asked for the investigation, which was ready for publication, to be aborted. When he granted us permission to conduct interviews, he did not expect to be promoted. What initially appeared as a simple act of rebellion unexpectedly became a potential risk for him due to his unforeseen promotion.

Nonetheless, fieldwork has taught us a valuable lesson when it comes to providing interim analysis, such as an intermediary report, during the research process. While it may seem promising to offer glimpses of progress before the completion of the study, it can sometimes have unintended consequences. People can become impatient and unwilling to wait for the nuanced details that will later refine initial strong claims. Moreover, those who fear that the results may reflect poorly on them may start to take defensive actions, undermining the validity of the research process. Presenting a premature interim report can result in spending more time explaining and clarifying the interim findings rather than focusing on the final report. Therefore, our advice is clear: if possible, avoid submitting a mid-term report of the research. However, if an interim report must be delivered, it is crucial to concentrate on formal aspects such as the number of hearings or interviews conducted, challenges faced and overcome, and logistical problems resolved.

As part of the bargaining process that sometimes involves negotiating access to the field, it is possible that the principal investigator may be asked by the host institution or by the funder, such as the Armed Forces or Ministry of Defense, to include military personnel in the research team. This occurred to Rafa during the 1998 project conducted in military training centers in Spain. This petition is a double-edged sword: while their knowledge of the institution can undoubtedly be very relevant, those who suggest it typically have ulterior motives. Their intention is often not to enhance the research, but rather to have an inside source. This source can keep them perpetually informed and enable them to react swiftly to anything that, from their perspective, could jeopardize the institution, their career, or to potentially skew the analysis.

Another similar experience was when Rafa's team was told that the Armed Forces would help them by providing an interviewer, thus saving the team the trips that they would otherwise have had to do. The result was a disaster. Rafa would like to believe that it was not out of malice, but rather due to a lack of skill. However, the interviewer contaminated many of the responses with negative comments about the questions that were formulated, allowed superiors to be present in the room while interviewing soldiers, and edited answers. As a consequence, the results were published with a warning that cautioned readers of severe validity problems regarding the interviews (Martínez et al., 2012). To avoid such situations, it is crucial to maintain control over the various processes involved. The particular lesson learned is that in order to instil confidence in the interviewees and ensure confidentiality, especially when dealing with commanders, it is advisable to send an experienced researcher to conduct the interviews. In some projects, it is not uncommon for junior researchers to be assigned the task of conducting interviews in order to gain valuable experience. However, when it comes to the military, our experience suggests that this approach is not advisable at all.

Rut faced significant distrust from most Latin American military organizations. There was nothing similar to Rafa's experience, as the Ministries of Defense in Latin America were and are still undesirably connected to the military and do not have the power to demand a comprehensive study of the Armed Forces. However, through her professional career, she earned respect from military personnel in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala. Despite their initial resistance, the military eventually agreed to engage in discussions, even more extensively than anticipated. They wanted to be heard and express their perspectives, which they believed Rut had overlooked. Their hesitation was not rooted in a lack of trust in the researchers' analytical abilities, but rather a fear of the changes that could potentially disrupt their long-established status quo. The military perceived the process of democratization as a diminishing of their professional status. However, Rut's perseverance played a crucial role. She continued her work on the subject, and over time, whether willingly or reluctantly, the military began to recognize her as an expert in the field, for example, inviting her to be a speaker in the celebration of the 50 anniversaries of the Inter American Defense School (CID in Spanish). Her dedication and commitment helped bridge the gap and fostered a growing acceptance and acknowledgement of her expertise among military personnel.

Even with formal clearance granted, our experience has shown that formal access to an organization does not automatically translate into the willingness of individuals to collaborate, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. During our project with all military students in Spain back in 1998, Rafa's team had concerns that the project could be abruptly canceled at any point. Furthermore, there was a genuine concern that due to the historical lack of transparency, if the questionnaire were to fall into the hands of less open-minded members of the Armed Forces or the Ministry of Defense, the respondents, particularly the students, might already be influenced or indoctrinated to provide predetermined answers. And it is not only distrustful. In one particular military school, we could clearly hear the director instructing his deputy to distract us by giving us a tour of the facilities, while someone hurriedly obtained a questionnaire for him to review. He even mentioned the possibility of canceling the project depending on the nature of the questions. These instances highlight the need for careful navigation, constant vigilance, and adaptability to overcome potential obstacles and maintain the integrity of the research process.

2.2 Generating Rapport

In the initial stages of a project, it becomes imperative to provide as much certainty as possible regarding researchers' identity, purpose of the research, data processing procedures, and the intended use of the collected information. Beyond this transparency the researcher might show sufficient knowledge of the military world—what includes a precise use of the vocabulary and military terms—as there is a significant cultural gap due to most academics are not familiar with the military ethos. We must try to create a comfortable environment for participants and help them understand that the researcher is genuinely interested in their perspectives and eager to learn from them. Reinforcing this rapport by actively listening, nodding, and maintaining a respectful presence rather than a submissive one, has been a good option for us.

However, although trust must be generated and pursued, we must also be cautious and take preventive actions. During the 1998 project, and in anticipation that a coordinated response could be mounted in all the military training academies, Rafa's team arranged the logistics to ensure that the research team would be divided into groups of two or three members, and in ten hectic days the questionnaire was administered in all 32 military academies. There were days when we woke up in one city, had lunch in another, and slept in a different one. When we departed from the first academy, our perspective was quite pessimistic, and we even remarked: -Well, at least no one will be able to prevent us from studying this academy. On the ninth day of fieldwork, with three centers still to be surveyed, a member of the Army General Staff gave the order to halt the study and sequester the answer sheets from the previous 29 military schools. Rafa spoke with a highly respected Spanish personality to explain the situation to him. Following that, calls were made within the Ministry of Defense, and the Director General of Defense Policy had to intervene and lift the veto. He warned the different directors of academies involved that it was

a university research project and that the Armed Forces were only the object of study, they were the hosts, and they had no right to interfere with the research. The decision to whether to agree to host it had already been taken by the appropriate authority.

In the context of interviews, we acknowledge the significance of the interviewer's profile in the silent power dynamic that unfolds. This power dynamic can even come into play before the actual interview occurs. It is not uncommon for participants, including politicians we have worked with, to request a preview of the questionnaire. Our recommendation is to decline such requests. Instead, it is advisable to inform them about the topics that will be covered without providing specific questions in advance. Sharing the questions beforehand would compromise the spontaneity of the interview.

It is important for the interviewees to feel at ease, as perceiving a lack of control in the situation might cause them to become closed off and distrustful, which can hinder the gathering of necessary information. Therefore, we recommend allowing the participants to have some autonomy in selecting the date, location, and time of the interview. This approach would help establish rapport with the participant. However, it should be borne in mind that in a considerable number of times, interviewees are often in the room because a superior (military or civilian) has required them to do so, so they will be likely to finish the interview as quickly as possible. If after enduring two or three defensive answers, full of platitudes and vagueness, the researcher is able to draw the participant out and lead them to provide more elaborate answers, then the interview will properly begin. If the researcher fail to cross the Rubicon, it will be a waste of time for them both.

REPENFAS21 project, in which we interviewed members of Spain's political, military and defense industry elites, has confirmed this strategy. Nineteen of the 20 generals and admirals were interviewed for about an hour. However, there was one who dispatched us in 32 min after making the researchers wait longer than the interview lasted. He certainly carried out the order he had received from the Ministry of Defence to collaborate in the study, met us, and answered our questions, but he was deliberately unhelpful. The experience with the rest of the interviewees was successful and productive, and that is the bottom line. To see it otherwise would be to remain anecdotal.

After years of researching the military, two other formal issues have proven to be crucial for a smooth interaction with participants: punctuality and dress code. Military personnel highly value punctuality and hold a negative view of those who are unpunctual. Furthermore, the locations where researchers are summoned are often large facilities such as ministries or military installations, and there is typically a considerable distance to walk from the entrance to the participant's office. It is also common to undergo a security check beforehand. All of these factors can easily consume approximately 15 min. Arriving with plenty of time to spare, will allow the researcher to do so calmly, and if you are 5 or 10 min early, you can apologize and be led into a waiting room. If we fail to factor in this additional time, you will run the risk of being late and being nervous and flustered by the rush.

Being punctual is just as crucial as dressing respectfully, as military officers expect both from individuals. Male researchers are advised to wear a suit, including a tie-in winter and no tie-in summer. Female researchers should dress appropriately based on the interviewee's rank and adhere to the customary social norms of the country. Soldiers, and particularly officers, expect the researcher's attire to be in line with their own uniform. It is important that your clothing does not draw more attention, either through excess or deficiency, than your interview questions. While adhering to these formalities does not guarantee a successful interview, failing to meet either requirement would almost certainly have the opposite effect.

3 Techniques

Our research had employed three primary techniques: survey questionnaires, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and the Delphi method with experts. The use of interviews has consistently proven to be a valuable qualitative method. While the typical duration of interviews was around 60–70 min, we encountered a wide range of interview lengths. Some interviews lasted as short as 12 min, with a soldier who provided only brief, monosyllabic responses, while others extended beyond two and a half hours, involving senior commanders who shared insightful examples from their field experiences. During the interviews, we observed variations in the communication style of the participants. Some interviewees provide concise and knowledgeable responses, offering valuable insights into the subject matter. However, others tend to be slower in their responses. We have also noted that politicians often possess a lower level of technical knowledge on defense issues and tend to rely on repetitive slogans.

In certain cases, military personnel exhibit a sense of secrecy, which can stem from suspicion, orders from superiors, or a lack of understanding regarding the purpose and significance of being interviewed for that specific project. When faced with such situations, interviews become more challenging, requiring efforts to alleviate suspicion and establish rapport. Most of the time, we have been successful in interviewing the participants. However, in some cases, both the participant and the researcher were eager to bring the interview to an end. One common initial concern relates to recording. Although we have not encountered any major issues in this regard, on several occasions, despite agreeing to be recorded, interviewees have made half-serious, half-joking remarks such as: "I should be careful with what I say." To minimize distractions, it is advisable to use a discreet recording device (preferably flat in shape) and avoid drawing attention to it until the interview has been completed.

With surveys, particularly more than with interviews, the questionnaire plays a crucial role. Once it has been designed and given to the respondent, there is no possibility to clarify or modify a question if we find that it has not been properly understood. We have never opted for the questionnaire implemented by an interviewer (by telephone or in person); we have always used self-administered questionnaires with

answers on an Optical Mark Reader (OMR) sheet, or online implementation, through the Qualtrics software. In 1998, we conducted initial briefings without the presence of commanding officers in the room, explaining to the participants who the research team was, the aim of the study, and the research objectives. We emphasized that our focus was solely on processing aggregated data to potentially improve the institution's knowledge about its human resources. We assured them of their anonymity and made it clear that no personal examinations would be conducted. This setup also provided an opportunity to address any immediate questions or concerns.

The utilization of OMR serves to minimize potential errors that may arise during manual data transfer. Nonetheless, this approach does present logistical hurdles, including the provision of pencils, erasers, and pencil sharpeners for each participant, ensuring an adequate supply of sharpened pencils, and effectively managing the distribution and collection of materials. These logistical considerations introduce complexities and additional costs to the survey implementation process. However, OMR sheets enabled us to efficiently survey a large number of individuals (up to 400) simultaneously. This approach proved particularly effective during our visits to the 32 military academies where we were able to gather all the students in a single room, or split them into one or two shifts.

On the other hand, the online survey method offers logistical advantages and is generally considered more cost-effective. However, it does come with its own challenges. Apart from the expense of acquiring licenses for reliable software, another obstacle arises in the form of sending reminders to participants. In our study, we discovered that sending personalized invitations and reminders at two- and three-week intervals resulted in a higher response rate, enabling us to achieve our desired level of participation. However, we were mindful of maintaining a delicate balance between persistence and avoiding any sense of impertinence when sending reminders.

The latest technique we have used is the Delphi method which facilitated structured discussions among experts to gather insights on topics with limited available information (Beiderbeck et al., 2021). However, due to the logistical challenges of assembling in-person experts for multiple rounds of discussions, in REPENFAS21, we opted for an online implementation, that allowed us to access a diverse group of experts with highly specialized professional backgrounds and hectic agendas, who would have been otherwise difficult to bring together in a physical setting. For the purposes of this chapter, it is crucial to highlight that utilizing a self-administered online questionnaire facilitated our engagement with a group of experts possessing extensive knowledge and expertise, creating opportunities for valuable insights that would have been otherwise inaccessible due to spatial and temporal limitations (Vicente Oliva et al., 2023).

The size of the sample is something very relevant. Most of the time it is provided by the institution and we can't control the quantity or the individuals who participate. However, most of the time we have asked to access the whole universe (i.e., every student in the military school, or those senior commanders attending a specific course). In the overall ERGOMAS research initiative (3000 questionnaires, plus 550, and 250 interviews), which aimed to explore the cultural gap between the

military and the rest of the society, a specific decision was made to distribute the questionnaire in the officers' academies of the three-armed forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force), and in one Spanish university. However, without thorough consideration and for the sake of convenience, the University of Barcelona was selected, inadvertently overlooking the center-periphery cleavage. This oversight resulted in a significant discrepancy that did not accurately reflect the socio-political situation in Spain. Recognizing this limitation, we subsequently included the University of Burgos, located in the center of Spain where individuals tended to identify more strongly with a Spanish identity and held somewhat more conservative social views. Interestingly, the results from these two universities were contrasting. Consequently, to address the shortcomings of the sample and mitigate potential biases, we expanded our questionnaire distribution to four Spanish universities and utilized the average results obtained from all four institutions. This adjustment required considerable extra effort, labor, and resources.

When employing the Delphi method, the selection process for experts was more transparent. We established a set of criteria to guide our selection and actively sought out experts who met those criteria. Identifying highly prestigious experts was made possible through the networks we had developed over the years, as well as the reputation for rigor and reliability that our research and publications had cultivated among other experts. A similar observation can be made regarding the interviews we have conducted throughout the years. It has been through our network of contacts and the meticulousness of our work that doors have been opened and access granted. For early career researchers, beginnings can often be challenging, with many doors initially closed. Perseverance and transparency, along with active participation in congresses, conferences, and the dissemination of their research through publications, can gradually earn them a favorable reputation and expand their opportunities over time.

4 Ethical Considerations

None of our studies has been submitted to the ethics committees of our universities or research centers. The reason is that when we began our work three decades ago, these committees did not exist in our institutions. Moreover, it was our understanding that our studies were not particularly sensitive. In the case of the elites, we exclusively inquired about aspects of their work, while for the soldiers and sailors surveyed, the questions regarding socio-political topics were not different from those asked of the general public. It is true that perhaps we should have made greater efforts to allow those uninterested in responding to opt out. Due to the formal nature of the military environment, it is possible that the initial instructions provided in the questionnaires indicating the total voluntary character of their participation may have been insufficient. In retrospect, it may have been better to explore alternative methods that would have respected individuals' wishes to abstain from participating if they so desired.

Starting from the REPENFAS21 project (2019–2024), we have ensured that all participants are adequately informed about the research objectives and the level of collaboration expected from them. Prior to commencing the interview, participants are required to provide their informed consent by signing a form. This form includes various aspects, one of which is indicating their acceptance of the interviews being recorded. REPENFAS21 was the first study in which we used informed consent and the information sheet. Nevertheless, what our research team perceived as a breakthrough in conducting research according to higher ethical standards was not resonate the same way with the participants. The formality of the information sheet and the wording of the consent form, rather than reassuring them of the voluntariness and the commitment to privacy and confidentiality, alerted them as to the potentially serious outcomes that might result from the interviews.

One of the key risks inherent in conducting research of this nature is the potential for data leakage, which can compromise the anonymity and confidentiality necessary for such studies. Any unauthorized release of interview content, particularly when taken out of context or used for non-research purposes, can cause irreparable harm to the participants and have detrimental effects on the researcher's career. Moreover, interviewees may be tempted to deny statements they made or the permission they granted for their use. Additionally, it can result in intricate and expensive legal consequences.

Due to the absence of guidance from ethics committees, we took it upon ourselves to establish stringent protective measures from the beginning. In the interviews, to ensure participant anonymity, we adopted a common practice of using codes to identify participants, thereby eliminating any potential identification of them. When transcription of the interviews was necessary, we entrusted this task to companies holding European data protection certification. Those certified companies adhere to strict confidentiality requirements and implement robust security measures to safeguard the information. In the past, access to data was limited to a restricted group of researchers. However, in the present day, the entire research team has registered access to a securely encrypted hard disk contracted in a cloud environment. This approach was not driven by distrust but rather to mitigate the risk of unauthorized disclosure.

Since we did not have the opportunity to submit our research proposals to these committees, we were particularly attentive to the importance of protecting the participants and ensuring their anonymity. It was crucial that none of the participant's identities were revealed, avoiding stigmatizing specific military units or ranks, and preventing any negative impact on public opinion. After years of military opacity, we were determined not to convey misleading images or simplistic interpretations through our investigations, as such representations could reinforce the military institution's resistance to accepting researchers. Our goal was to conduct our research with integrity, respect for confidentiality, and a commitment to presenting a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

In the 1998 study, we recognized the clear risk of deductive disclosure, especially considering the small size of certain military training centers. With just two socio-demographic data, such as province of birth and father's occupation, it was

highly likely that the cadets could be easily identified. Additionally, some training centers had a minimal representation of women, further increasing the potential for deductive disclosure. During the implementation of the questionnaire at the first center, a coincidental observation occurred when the first woman placed her finished questionnaire on the desk occupied by the researchers. We noticed that she had not marked the “sex” box on the answer sheet. This made us aware of the potential risks, and each time we conducted a survey at a center, we remained vigilant about this possibility. We noticed that a majority of women did not complete the “sex” field, something that we did once the students left the room. Perhaps we should have engaged in further discussions regarding the ethics surrounding this decision. However, back in 1998, as the first study conducted on the Armed Forces in Spain, the prospect of surveying all students of military schools missing data on women population seemed to be an even less favorable option.

Regarding the physical protection of documentation, we took extensive measures to ensure its security. For instance, we opted for a researcher from the project to fly from Madrid to Barcelona to transport the answer sheets, instead of relying on a courier company. Although the risk of loss or information leakage was minimal, we chose this approach to mitigate any potential risks. Within this strategy of protecting participants, for example, the study on military academies in Spain (Martínez, 2007) was published seven years after its completion to ensure that the students surveyed had already left the academies and dispersed throughout dozens of military units across the country.

Reflecting on our early days of research, Rafa’s team was surprised that they did not encounter more difficulties considering their initial naivety and trust in the inherent protection offered by our good intentions and honesty. However, the team is grateful that they have not experienced any unfortunate incidents or malicious intent thus far. Nevertheless, Rafa had learned valuable lessons from this experience. First, never again conduct a sensitive interview without obtaining informed consent, and ensure that recordings are securely stored and encrypted to protect the confidentiality of the data.

5 Emotions: There Are Always some Bad Times

Throughout the thirty years of our research on military personnel in non-democratic contexts, as well as in democratic ones, we have encountered numerous situations that, in retrospect, may seem somewhat amusing. However, at the time, they instilled fear, unease, and raised concerns about the continuation of our work. Some of these situations were particularly uncomfortable. For example, there was an incident during which Rut was delivering a lecture on potential confidence-building measures to a high-level course at the Argentinean Navy. In a rather unpleasant manner, the sailors interrupted her lecture and displayed aggressive gestures, essentially preventing her from continuing with her presentation. The director of the Naval Academy intervened by interrupting the class and offering Rut a cup of coffee.

Subsequently, when the class resumed, a naval captain spoke on behalf of his classmates, apologizing for their inappropriate behavior.

On another occasion, during a lecture on the prosecution of human rights' offenders delivered to officers of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Argentina, the attendees began to shout and even insult the Argentinean president. Leveraging her prior experience, Rut managed to calm the situation, requesting that each person speak individually and justify their position. As they were compelled to articulate their views individually, the aggression dissipated, and they struggled to substantiate their stance. Both incidents serve as examples of the challenges encountered during our research. They underscore the importance of maintaining composure, engaging in respectful dialogue, and fostering an environment conducive to understanding differing perspectives.

The first time an army corps declared Rafael *nongrata* was in 1998. The fax machine in his office at the University received the document from three different numbers, seemingly with the intention to warn him before he was formally cautioned. In other words, even in the most challenging situations, there are always allies within the institution. That was undoubtedly the most critical moment during the project. The project was blocked, and the feeling of anguish and loneliness was immense. Part of the research team decided to leave the project or reduce their participation, fearing an abrupt end and the impossibility of publishing any results. This is when Professor Juan Linz enters the scene. With his prestige and reputation in studying democratic transitions, he was able to explain the relevance of our study to a part of the governmental elite. We included him as part of the research team, and with his protection and the better-informed elites, we were able to continue, albeit with some scars.

Cuba is undoubtedly the most challenging fieldwork setting that we have encountered. The military's prohibition against communicating with foreigners makes research extremely difficult (López Estrada & Deslauriers, 2011). Despite this, we were able to contact several retired military personnel, but only two active military members were interviewed by Rut. It is worth noting that these two officers were fearful and scared during the conversation, as they could have been sanctioned for speaking out. It is not for nothing that Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) are a central institution of the governing regime and wield enormous political and economic power. They also have strong capabilities for surveillance and repression that not only frightens the population but also its own members. Nobody trusts anybody. Building trusting personal relationships that allow you to access such impenetrable organizations is decades to develop. There can be no rush in these kinds of cases.

In the case of Cuba one of these complications took on a tragicomic tone in 2021. In some workshops with young Cubans held in Madrid and organized by Rut, we explained to them what transitions to democracy had been like in countries with Armed Forces that had little or no democratic tradition. Months later this became

the subject of news reports in the daily newspaper *Granma*,¹ on Cuban television news programs, and on its official program “*Razones de Cuba*” (Reasons for Cuba).² During the TV program, one of the workshop participants named Dr. Carlos Leonardo Vázquez González, made a startling admission. He revealed that he had served as a Castro spy for over twenty years. Referred to as Agent “Fernando”, he publicly identified us as “Army generals” on both a television and radio program. He accused us of encouraging the Armed Forces to confront the people.³ One of the consequences was that Rut and other participating researchers were unable to return to Cuba. Frustration at not being able to complete such an interesting research project was our predominant emotion.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

As noted in previous sections, military personnel have a dislike for uncertainty and are reluctant to answer questions that could potentially endanger their professional career, or allow their subordinates to exercise freedom of expression in such a way as to compromise their service record. Consequently, it is quite common to be requested to provide questionnaires in advance, allowing them to prepare noncommittal answers. Our advice is to never agree to do this. At most, you might wish to generally outline the items that will be addressed. If answers are prepared, naturalness is lost and, ultimately, all interviews run the risk of being identical, as participants can communicate with each other or receive guidelines from the higher levels of the organization.

Successfully overcoming these defense mechanisms and apprehensions requires significant time and experience. If these barriers are not effectively addressed, the resulting answers will hold little value for research purposes. In fact, several interviews proved to be inconsequential due to defensive, hesitant, unwilling, or vague responses from the interviewees. In circumstances where adverse conditions prevail, it is preferable to abstain from conducting an interview or survey. These processes demand substantial effort and resources. Therefore, prior to initiating fieldwork, it is crucial to carefully assess whether you have devised the most suitable approach strategy and obtained sufficient credentials to ensure access and conduct research effectively.

Another considerable risk, particularly prevalent in non-democratic environments, is the risk of co-optation. That risk is always present, and only the

¹ <https://www.granma.cu/pensar-en-qr/2021-11-01/las-acciones-de-yunior-no-son-genuinas-el-agente-fernando-lo-prueba-01-11-2021-22-11-43>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qL2uO70bTxc&list=PLFHsQ4qYzNtF2zRgOLBAGXNF Iw7gkijZF&index=17>

³ (Radio Cubana, 11/11/2021, minute 11:40) <https://www.radiocubana.cu/articulos-especializados-sobre-la-radio/radio-cubana/el-agente-fernando-afirma-quieren-construir-agentes-de-cambio-en-cuba-audio/>

researcher's own integrity can protect him from it. The best and only strategy is to refuse any temptations to accept perks or benefits in exchange for altering or softening the conclusions of a study. When the researcher succumbs to their demands, they forfeit their freedom to thoroughly analyze and report on the issues identified within those organizations. Resisting certain pressures may indeed entail risks to the study, but it serves to uphold your scientific prestige and strengthen your research integrity. Engaging in confrontation serves no purpose.

One possible approach to enhance protection could have been a more active presence on social media or the Internet, where we could have shared our research findings instead of relying solely on Google's algorithms to determine our online visibility. By making our texts readily available for potential participants to read, showcasing the support and funding received from ministries and reputable organizations, and highlighting the discreet media coverage of our research, we might have been able to reduce any reluctance or skepticism about our intentions. This transparency could have facilitated a better understanding of our work and minimized reservations among potential participants.

For over thirty years, we have tirelessly cultivated what was once desolate land. Through persistent efforts of cleansing and nourishment, we have transformed it into fertile ground. Your steadfastness and integrity will serve as your greatest allies, just as they have been for us. However, it is crucial to prioritize your own protection to ensure that any stumbling blocks you encounter are not irreparable. Engaging in meaningful research on the military is an immensely fulfilling endeavor. Often, extensive efforts will be required to explore the theoretical dimensions since the existing literature may not be comprehensive. It will be necessary to conduct relevant measurements, analyze the data, and compare them against established theoretical principles to validate your hypotheses. This process can be lengthy and exhausting at times, but the satisfaction of contributing as a scientist will be unparalleled.

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Chapter 6

Researching the Elites of Power: The Case of the Parliamentarians



Xavier Coller  and Manuel Alcántara 

1 Selection of the Samples

Imagine having—more or less—identified and defined your research topic. Specifically, let's work on the assumption that a researcher wants to know how consensus is built in politics; that is, how agreements are generated among political actors in which participants decide to support—or not to oppose—the same initiative, for example, what a future law will be. And that, in this context, you want to obtain the opinion of the actors, i.e., citizens' representatives. Or, for example, the plan is to do research on assembly members' opinions or political careers.

This is a difficult audience to reach compared with other sectors of the population because they: (i) tend to have a hectic agenda and spend a lot of time traveling or in meetings with other politicians, organizations, citizens, etc.; (ii) have other people who manage their agenda, who act as gatekeepers, and seek to restrict “additional” tasks such as interviews with researchers; (iii) are often fearful that the results of the interviews will be used for purposes that are not strictly academic or leaked to the media; (iv) frequently do not understand that collaborating with academics is also a form of accountability; and (v) sometimes do not know the purpose of academia.

The study will probably require either an in-depth or a broad approach, or a combination of both. That is, one would need to talk to a small group of people but focus on a few key issues and go into (almost) all their views in-depth, or survey many people in order to draw a general picture from which to draw conclusions about the whole population. These two perspectives are called qualitative and quantitative, but

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as King et al. (1994) argue, this distinction does not imply incompatibility. In both cases, it is necessary to select the participants. The selection criteria vary naturally depending on the study's objectives.

If a qualitative study is preferred, it is imperative to carefully select who will provide information: they should not only be “key informants,” but also “key actors” in a particular policy. In other words, selection criteria are needed. For example, Collier and his team have studied the construction of consensus and conflict in politics. The question they asked themselves at the beginning of the study was: “Is any politician worth talking to about this?”, and the negative response led them to talk to whoever was most familiar with negotiating with political rivals. This is a strong example of the need to select the right criterion: choosing the right people who have direct knowledge of the phenomenon under study. For this, it is necessary to identify who has been involved in negotiations on laws, for example, and try to interview them. Recently, in different online meetings of the team—social science is usually a collective enterprise and the COVID-19 pandemic required virtuality—new considerations arose about who could contribute information of interest to the study. These considerations led to the formation of the selection criteria. Several potential participants were brainstormed. In that vein, perhaps people in positions of responsibility in parliamentary groups could be interviewed since, to paraphrase Mills (1956), they predominantly decide the direction of a vote. Since there are periods of more or less conflict, it seems necessary to select experienced parliamentarians who can also give an insight into how the ways of “doing politics” have changed. It is also possible that men and women, younger or older people, deal differently with negotiations with rivals, and their experiences can strengthen the study. And, of course, it is also important to talk to people from competing parties and representatives of different territorial chambers.

Our research team's discussions resembled a “brainstorming” session. They were guided by one key question: “which parliamentarians should we target?”, which helped to determine some basic criteria: gender, age, experience (which usually goes with age), position of political responsibility, involvement in negotiating legislation (also associated with experience and political responsibility), parties, and the chamber to which they belong. With some of these variables, we can now construct Table 6.1, which we have used in our study to select key actors and respondents on consensus-building.

The logic behind this table is that of *variability* and *sample size*. To achieve *variability*, the objective was to choose key actors to help us better understand the varying perspectives on the construction of the consensus or the conflict. To do this, it seems logical to resort to the most relevant contextual variable: the chambers. We know that there are chambers in which the generation of agreements is more frequent than in others (Collier & Jaime-Castillo, 2022). Selecting people from one or the other may provide different perspectives. A second criterion is experience in managing the negotiation of laws. One can look for the drafters of laws in particular chambers and discard those who have no parliamentary experience unless they hold an important position in the parliamentary group (e.g., spokesperson, chairperson) and it is believed that they can provide some relevant insight as a “key informant.”

Table 6.1 Sample selection

	Chambers of representation									
	More consensus				Intermediaries		Less consensus			
	Navarre		Catalonia		Andalusia		Galicia		Valencia	
	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
Party 1										
Party 2										
Party 3										
...										
...										
Party N										
TOTAL	50 (5)		135 (14)		109 (11)		75 (8)		99 (10)	

Note: “Total” means number of seats in each chamber; in brackets is the number of final interviewees in each chamber

Additionally, the sex of the individual may be key not only because of the different ways in which negotiations may be handled (and this is a key explanatory variable) but also because it adds variability and strengthens the research. Finally, given that ideology or being part of the government or the opposition may be key, the party to which the Members of Parliament—hereafter MP—represents should be part of the selection criteria, and be transversal to all of them.

The result of the team’s discussions was Table 6.1 in which, in each cell, the names of specific people are written so that substitutions can be made if necessary. This comprised our “purposive sample.” These people are selected because they are supposed to have something to say, as they are familiar with the phenomenon we want to study: be it consensus-building, candidate selection, conflict management, socialization in parliament, psychological profile, political careers, or ideological inclination.

Let us now turn to the way in which we face a classic problem of qualitative research: the scope or *number of people to interview*; that is, the size of the *N*. Just as in random sampling, the *N* is defined by the size of the population and, from it, we make generalizations that rely on randomness and margin of error; in qualitative studies the approach is usually different. Purposive samples are used to know the different views, explanations, and interpretations interviewees have about a particular phenomenon and its correlates. But even in those circumstances, we need to have an idea about how many people we need to interview. This was our problem at the start of the consensus-building research, which led to the following solution. Since we knew the population of representatives, we followed a rule of thumb by establishing a percentage and making sure that in all the above table’s cells, there was a name written. If the number of regional parliamentarians in Spain is 1212, for example, an achievable proportion might be 5% or 10% (about 61 or 121 parliamentarians). If we had wanted to study the four extreme cases in the table, then we might have tentatively decided on 10% for each chamber, and would therefore interview a total of 48 MPs. This is not a strict rule, but we have sought to apply it with

flexibility and common sense, since the aim is to ensure some variability, and this requires a certain amplitude.

Sample surveys of parliamentarians are becoming increasingly common and pose special problems. The people to whom the questionnaire is administered are usually chosen at random to ensure the sample's reliability and the subsequent generalizability of the results to the population. This is the case of the study known by the acronym PELA (Parliamentary Elites in Latin America), which has been carried out since 1994 by a research team at the University of Salamanca (Spain), led by Manuel Alcántara and linked to the Political Science department at the Ibero-American Institute (García et al., 2013; Rivas Pérez & Bohigues, 2019; Rivas Pérez et al., 2020; Barragán et al., 2020).¹ The study is based on face-to-face interviews with representative samples of members of the legislature from 18 countries. The sampling criterion predominantly takes into account the partisan composition of the particular Congress, although it also considers gender differences and, later, territorial representation. Given the different chamber sizes in the Latin American countries covered by the PELA study, the sample ranges from 90% (Costa Rica) to 25% (Mexico) of the chamber's composition. On the other hand, in countries whose legislature is bicameral—that is, in half of the countries studied—it was decided from the outset to focus the study exclusively on the lower house (Congress of Deputies), whose size is always larger than that of the upper house (Senate).

One of the most recurrent problems is that although the sample is initially random, the refusal of some parliamentarians to respond leads to substitutions in the sample and that, in relatively small populations, there comes a time when almost the entire population is included. Randomness is undermined here and also, therefore, the generalizability of the results. It may also happen that the research team decides to take the entire population as the target group in order to obtain a more or less acceptable response rate. In this case, there is no randomization and the results of the study may be affected by self-selection bias or nonresponse. Self-selection and nonresponse both bias external validity and increase generalization error (Mateos & Corral, 2022). In both cases, one solution we have applied is sample calibration (Coller & Sánchez-Ferrer, 2021, p. 7). This requires complete population information on basic variables (e.g., gender, party, and territory of choice) in order to obtain unbiased estimators that facilitate the generalization of results.

2 Access to the Field

Access to parliamentarians poses fewer problems than access to, for example, intelligence services, members of terrorist organizations, or other groups in complex or clandestine situations. However, they do pose challenges that to overcome with some success by applying various solutions and anticipating problems given the

¹ See <https://oir.org.es/pela/>

context in which these MPs operate (see previous section). These difficulties can result in a refusal to participate, which can jeopardize the success of the research. Some of these problems can be anticipated at the access phase and mitigated by letters of introduction sent to parliamentarians. The goal of each researcher is to gain access and convince the representative to participate in the study. To this end, the approach should be adapted to the cultural environment of the country in which we are working (e.g., in the use of language, norms of courtesy...) while maintaining broad common features.

Access to representatives is made by means of initial contact with a letter to two types of key actors. On the one hand, to the leaders of the institution (President of the Chamber, Parliament Bureau members). On the other, to the leaders of the parliamentary groups (spokespersons, general secretaries). This letter informs them about the study and asks for their support in encouraging representatives to participate. A general template can be found in Box 6.1. In our experience, it is desirable that institutional and parliamentary group leaders are informed about the planned study. It is a sign of deference to them which, at the very least, can help to prevent vetoes due to lack of knowledge and can help gain access to parliamentarians in their groups.

The credentials with which we present ourselves to the institution are important. Therefore, we seek the endorsement of a relevant personality, whether academic or, as in some of our studies, political. But it is important not to mix political endorsements; that is, one political figure should be used to support the researcher among the representatives of party X, but not for party Y. For instance, in one of our surveys (Coller, 2016, 2018), Professor Juan J. Linz—one of the most prestigious social scientists of the last century, Yale University professor and Prince of Asturias award for social sciences in 1987—endorsed the research and sent a letter to all parliamentary leaders, which defused possible reluctance and opened the doors of some parliamentary groups. This was the first survey in Spain of parliamentarians from the 19 chambers of representation (Congress, Senate, and 17 regional chambers) and some reluctance to participate was foreseen. That project also taught us that there are two types of gatekeepers: politicians and staff. The *politician* can be the parliamentary leader or political “boss” of many MPs. The *staff* forms the secretariat of the group; they are the administrative apparatus that manages the day-to-day running of the parliamentary group. Their influence is discussed below.

Once the parliamentary leaders have been contacted, it is time to gain access to each of the people chosen to be interviewed. Given that we are dealing with political representatives, there is nothing better than a formal presentation in the form of a personalized letter sent by post. In Boxes 6.1 and 6.2 we propose two models that we have used with some success. Although the exchange of messages by email is common, given that a political representative may receive many messages every day, for the first introduction it is appropriate for the parliamentarian to receive a formal letter. Sometimes it may also be considered necessary to make a call to the recipients of this letter in order to expand on the explanations or to answer questions. Our experience shows how an explanatory letter requesting cooperation can open many doors.

Box 6.1: Model A: Cover Letter

I am writing to you to ask for your collaboration and help. We are a team of academics who are conducting the third survey of parliamentarians in Spain to learn about their perceptions on a variety of issues, focusing on the construction of consensus and political conflict. This study is sponsored with competitive funds by the Ministry of Science and Innovation under the code PID2019-108667GB-I00. More information is available at <https://consenso.uned.es/>.

Our study is part of the international *Comparative Candidates Survey* project, of which I am the coordinator in Spain, and in which academics from more than 30 countries carry out the same survey of their parliamentary representatives. This is an international programme of great prestige and impact, which has made it possible to advance our knowledge of the political representatives of the world's leading democracies.

The team carrying out this work comprises professors from UNED, the University of Burgos, Pablo de Olavide University and the Autonomous University of Madrid. We are backed by a long and solid academic track record. Perhaps you have heard about our research or we have interviewed you at some point. You can find some of our work on our website. I am giving you these references so that you will understand that I am asking for your help in a reputable academic project of international relevance.

Our study is based on a survey of parliamentarians from the 19 chambers of representation in Spain. I would be very grateful if you could help us by answering the questionnaire, which you can access via the QR code below or on the website <https://consenso.uned.es/encuesta/>. It takes about 30 minutes to answer. The questions require no prior preparation. The answers are confidential and anonymous so that the person is not identified and their individual answers are not made public. The analysis of the data is always done on an aggregate basis and never identifies individuals, as you can see in our publications on the aforementioned website.

I would be grateful if you could answer the questionnaire so that the multiplicity of political voices in Spain is reflected in this international study. Thank you very much for your participation in this research to better understand the functioning of our democracy.

Should you have any questions, please contact us by phone or by email at your earliest convenience.

Box 6.2: Model B: Cover Letter

Dear Assembly Member and President of the Assembly,

The new situation in Latin America suggests that the progress of politics, in terms of its quality, is not possible if it is not accompanied by an improvement in the quality of the political class. Within the political class, those engaged in legislative work are a substantive part of it. They play an important role because of their place in the political system, as party members, as well as because of their positioning in day-to-day legislative and oversight issues. However, despite the importance of this group, there are few empirically based studies.

In this context, the present research, for which we ask for your invaluable collaboration, aims to analyze the opinions, attitudes and values of members of this assembly, continuing a line of action initiated 25 years ago by the University of Salamanca <https://oir.org.es/pela/>. Carrying out a new wave of interviews in your country will contribute to the study of Costa Rican Assembly members in the context of the socio-political change that the country is undergoing.

Since you have the ideal characteristics to be included in the representative sample, we would like to ask you to kindly lend us your time to conduct an interview with Dr. XXXX (email), who will be assisted by the research associate Dr. YYYYY (mobile phone). You will be given a personalized questionnaire, which you will be assisted to complete. The results of the questionnaire will be employed in a general publication at national and Latin American level, and the anonymity of your answers is fully guaranteed.

We thank you on behalf of ourselves and the entire research team for your invaluable collaboration, while reiterating the confidentiality of this study. We would also like to take this opportunity to inform you that we remain at your entire disposal for any questions you may have about this project or for any other reason you may consider appropriate.

In addition to institutional leaders and parliamentarians, one may encounter staff gatekeepers. These are people who are protective of the MP's agenda, and experience shows that it is highly desirable to cultivate a good relationship with them because, as has happened to us, whether or not one conducts interviews will ultimately depend on their understanding of the study and their willingness to make the researcher's life easier. It has always (or almost always) worked well for us to have a friendly conversation, to explain how important it is to participate in the study, or to convey the idea that their help is necessary to move forward.

It is worth taking a look at the letters of introduction in Boxes 6.1 and 6.2. Other similar to these have been used in our research in order to eliminate or defuse problems. They contain some of the elements mentioned above as ways to avoid potential pitfalls. Note that in order to generate favorable opinions and to show full transparency to avoid suspicion, the objective of the study is stated, and further

information is provided on a reference website. To reinforce confidence in the study, we provide information about the credibility of the research group by highlighting the team's experience and institutional endorsement. To convince the representative of the importance of their collaboration, the relevance of the study is highlighted, emphasizing its international dimension, and reasons are given for carrying out the survey. In order to obtain the parliamentarian's collaboration, ease of response, the duration of the survey and, above all, the confidentiality, and anonymity of the survey are emphasized. So as to ensure efficient communication, a contact form is provided.

On the other hand, the contacted MP or their staff may want to verify the nature of the study or the authority of the research team. It is important that study participants have all the information available to them and can clarify any doubts they may have. This also helps to convey the idea that we are committed to transparency. Therefore, based on our experience, we suggest the following:

- (i) Create a project website that provides all available information, including objectives, methodology, team members, credentials, non-partisan endorsements that reinforce the team's authority, the kind of results you are looking for, etc. This website will also serve as a letter of introduction, can be used as a reference in your contacts with parliamentarians, and will enable more efficient communications. Here are a couple of examples: <https://oir.org.es/pela/> and <https://consenso.uned.es/>
- (ii) Create a professional email address hosted by your institution so that you can be contacted whenever needed. For example, we use proyecto.consenso@upo.es (Universidad Pablo de Olavide) or elites@usal.es (Universidad de Salamanca).
- (iii) Clearly show the institutions providing financial support for the study. This support is often interpreted as an endorsement of the research.
- (iv) List the research team's scientific publications on the subject.

Another potential risk to representatives' participation is that the MP may believe that his or her views will be made public. This is a typical problem that can arise from mistrust or ignorance about academic work. The effect is that the person decides not to participate in the study. We have found two ways to address this problem. Firstly, there are two ways of proving that anonymity is guaranteed. On the one hand, the person can be referred to our previous studies in which there is no personal identification of the information or opinions expressed in a questionnaire or interview. For this purpose, it has been useful for us to have a project website on which to locate the references of these studies. On the other hand, this guarantee of anonymity can be emphasized in the first contact with the potential interviewee, and also with the help of an academic endorsement. Secondly, a confidentiality agreement can be drawn, signed by each member of the research team, in which they

undertake not to disclose any de-anonymized content of the interviews or questionnaires, nor to individually identify the opinions expressed by the interviewees.²

In our experience, the credibility of the team, the international relevance of the study, and the guarantee of anonymity have been the three key elements in MPs agreeing to collaborate in the study.

3 Interviewing Politicians

Fieldwork is the most stimulating period of any study. This is when team members come into contact with their subjects and there is uncertainty about the success of the research. In this environment, one can observe the gestures, the intonations, listen directly to the arguments, and perhaps take notes of reflections during the questionnaire (if not using a tablet). This method boosts the representative's confidence in the process. The trade-off is that it is much more costly in terms of money, human resources, and personal energy. In the first survey of parliamentarians in Spain (Coller et al., 2016, 2018), the survey was carried out face-to-face, thanks to a large budget and large team. Interviews were conducted in the 19 chambers of representation spread throughout the country (Congress, Senate and 17 regional chambers). Nevertheless, in subsequent waves, a mixed system was used: interviews were conducted online, by post and in person.³

In the PELA study, interviews are conducted within the first quarter following the start of the parliamentary term by two members of the research team who are usually *non-nationals* of that country. This foreign condition has sometimes posed problems in that the interviewers have sometimes been seen as agents or spies for the government or the opposition. But it has also brought advantages—the dress code requirements for accessing the buildings of the House of Representatives were usually relaxed for foreigners. Previously, MPs have been contacted by letter and a visit made to their offices to establish direct contact with support staff in order to set up the interview and fix the date(s). Given the occurrence of public holidays or blocked dates for parliamentary activity, it is advisable to check that these do not exist when scheduling fieldwork.

Once the appointments have been planned, it is useful to have a series of questions ready, the answers to which will help the researcher to better understand—and explain—the phenomenon under study. In thinking about the questions to pose, there are three contextual aspects on which we have focused in our work. First, for the reasons noted above, we need to consider the limited time to ask questions. Second, it is unlikely that we would be able to contact the same person again to ask questions we have missed. Third, we cannot waste our interviewees' time, as this

²An example of a confidentiality agreement in Spanish can be found at this website (consulted November 2022): <https://consenso.uned.es/opinion-y-percepciones-de-los-protagonistas/>

³See Roberts and Vandenplas (2017) for the errors and benefits of mixing methods, and Tourangeau (2017) for the use of mixing methods in survey research.

may damage our reputation and make further studies difficult, or even deter other MPs who have not yet been interviewed. These three factors lead us to prepare interview scripts or questionnaires that are short, concise, clear, unambiguous, and allow us to obtain the information necessary for our work.

For interview scripts, it is essential to formulate open questions so that the interviewee can elaborate on them in their interview. However, when dealing with politicians, who are experts in the art of speaking, our experience is that they tend to elaborate. As time is limited, experience dictates that questions should be specific and directed to the topic of interest. For example, asking “How do you explain consensus in politics?” is less appropriate than anticipating what elements might explain consensus and asking about them, such as “How do you think the national political climate affects the ability of rivals to reach agreements in regional parliaments?” Notice how questions that point to the causal relationship between the dependent variable (agreements, consensus) and an independent variable (national political climate) are asked. No generic questions are asked. Otherwise, what happened to one of us could also happen to you: despite to what we understood was quite a closed questionnaire, the verbosity of the interviewed parliamentarian combined with researchers’ difficulties in handling these situations led to a four-hours long interview! On other occasions, the long duration was due to the parliamentarian commenting on—or attempting to correct—questions, which he or she may find to be poorly formulated, or on which he or she has an opinion. For example, there are parliamentarians who on the ideological scale (1–10, where 1 is extreme left and 10 is extreme right) have questioned the numbering (“why is it that being left-wing is worth 1, and being right-wing is worth 10?”) or the nature of the scale itself, proposing alternatives such as “don’t you have a scale of fascism, 1—a little fascist, 10—very fascist?”. Naturally, it is explained to them that these scales are internationally used conventions; but these interventions increase the length of the interview. Nevertheless, there are interviews that are completed in 20 min because of the respondent’s speed of response.

Parliamentary surveys usually offer closed-ended questions, although there are often some open-ended questions. Vis and Stolwijk (2021) review some of the most relevant surveys and we recommend their work so that you can access the questionnaires from there, as well as the Comparative Candidates Survey.⁴ One of the most consolidated parliamentary surveys is that carried out in the PELA project. The PELA questionnaire is structured on the basis of questions that are mostly closed-ended, which facilitates coding for better comparative data handling.

There is one aspect of information gathering with difficult-to-access political actors that is worth noting: one of the most important decisions is to reinforce the anonymous nature of the information collected. If the researcher conducts a semi-structured interview (whether face-to-face, by telephone, or over the Internet), it is advisable to record the conversation and then transcribe it. Before recording it, you should ensure anonymity, indicate that the interviewee is assigned a code whose

⁴<https://www.comparativecandidates.org/documents>

correspondence with the name is known only to the research team (or the principal investigator) and, especially, obtain their approval to be able to record the interview.⁵ To introduce the use of tape recordings and the guarantee of anonymity in a natural way, an introduction to the interview can be read before starting to ask questions, such as the one reproduced in Box 6.3.

Box 6.3: Example of an Introduction to the Semi-structured Interview

Thank you very much for agreeing to collaborate with our study on the construction of consensus and conflict in Andalusian politics. As you have been informed, this is an open and anonymous interview. This means that your name will never appear in our analysis linked to any statement. Each interviewee has a code. Yours is XXX00000. In order to facilitate our work, please agree to an audio recording of the interview. For information purposes, if you wish, we can send you a transcript of the interview when we have it ready.

[Start recording after agreement has been obtained]

Thank you very much for voluntarily agreeing to be interviewed and giving your consent to record this conversation. As you know, we are trying to find out the views of parliamentarians on how consensus is generated in the discussion of laws. I am not going to ask you about specific individuals, nor do I want you to identify anyone in this conversation. Nothing you say will be attributed to you personally, but to the code XXX00000, and will remain so in our files. The correspondence between passwords and names is only held by the study's director. We have a limited amount of time, but if were necessary to stop the conversation, we will contact you again for resuming it.

If the participant does not give consent to be audio-recorded, there is no other choice but to recur to the traditional method of using a notebook, and taking hand-notes. If there are two people doing the interview—this could be facilitated in online interviews—, this should not be too much of a problem, but if the researcher is alone, as has happened to some of us, it can be challenging to juggle taking notes of the answers. We recommend to use the question numbers, and employ keywords, abbreviations, and relationship arrows; whatever it takes to help you recall the interview. Immediately after the interview, it is necessary to sit down in front of the notes and reconstruct as much of the conversation as possible. Again, the keywords, abbreviations, and graphics used will help the researcher to evoke the conversation as faithfully as possible.

The collection of information through questionnaires can be more varied. We have conducted surveys in person, by telephone, or remotely, either by post or through Internet platforms. The latter is quite common, although a face-to-face

⁵See Collier and Ramírez de Luis (2019) or Jiménez et al. (2018) for two studies based on semi-structured interviews to MPs.

survey is usually the most effective with parliamentarians.⁶ In PELA, for example, surveys are carried out in person, but instead of going to the interview with a paper questionnaire (which always requires the data to be entered into a computer program for processing thus augmenting the probability of making mistakes), tablets are used to write down the answers, which go directly to the data processing program. In any case, it is also useful to reinforce the guarantee of anonymity and the importance of consent when introducing the questionnaire (see Boxes 6.4 and 6.5).

Box 6.4: Sample Questionnaire Introduction (Online)

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this third academic survey of parliamentarians in Spain. As has been mentioned by mail, the survey is part of an international study called ‘Comparative Candidates Survey’. You can find more information on the survey website.

The survey deals with different aspects of the political reality in Spain. We thank you in advance for your candor. Any response to the questionnaire is treated as anonymous and no personal identification of your answers is ever made. The statistical treatment of the data is always aggregated. It is very important that this international survey reflects the different political voices in Spain.

You are going to fill in an anonymous survey which requires some attention. It usually takes just under 30 min to answer. Please, always use the same device to answer. We recommend using a computer (you can increase the size of the letters by pressing the ‘control’ and ‘+’ keys at the same time), but you can either use a tablet or a mobile phone. We also recommend taking the survey without interruptions.

If you have any suggestions, you can contact us when finishing the questionnaire.

Informed consent: If you feel that all your doubts have been clarified and you wish to participate in this study, click on the box to give your consent to answer the survey and then click ‘next’.

I have read the information about this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary, so I can leave the survey at any time, and I can leave any question unanswered. I am 18 years of age or older and give my consent to participate in the proposed study.

I do not consent to participate in this study.

Box 6.5: Example of an Introduction to a Questionnaire (Face-to-Face)

Good morning/afternoon. The Iberoamerican Institute of the University of Salamanca, Spain, is conducting a survey among members of the assembly to learn about their opinion on various issues related to their political and legislative activity. We would therefore like to thank you in advance for your cooperation. You have been selected arbitrarily using random methods. We guarantee the absolute anonymity and secrecy of your answers in strict compliance with the laws on statistical secrecy and personal data protection. Once the information has been recorded anonymously, the individual questionnaires will be destroyed immediately.

⁶See Freire et al. (2020) for an analysis of the pro and cons of different ways of managing questionnaires.

Although this introduction in the interview scripts and questionnaires helps to focus the interviewee, it is also important to adopt a script and questionnaire structure that provides a good balance between efficiency in time management and obtaining useful information for the study. For this reason, the scripts and questionnaires we have used in our work have a structure similar to this:

1. Introduction.
2. One or two general and introductory ice-breaker questions.
3. Clear and specific questions, with a simple grammatical structure and neutral in terms of values (not introducing bias). Questions should preferably be organized into themes or blocks and be concise.
4. In one of our surveys, it was helpful to ask at the end about their satisfaction with the questionnaire. This gave us an idea that we were on the right track—more than 85% satisfaction and dissatisfaction concentrated at the ideological extremes—and also served as a hook to convince other parliamentarians.
5. Farewell. Acknowledge its participation, indicate the participants when the aggregated results will be available, and leave the door open for future contacts.

These preparatory aspects should culminate in successful fieldwork, which is when the information required is collected. It is also to note that during the interviews, which usually take place in the chambers themselves, it is common for the assembly member's advisors to be present. In our experience, in approximately one-third of cases, the advisor intervenes occasionally when the deputy has a doubt. Interviews that are conducted face-to-face should not be left to be completed without the interviewer being present. This is an important aspect because, otherwise, the results of the research can be biased as there is no guarantee that it is the representative and not his or her technical staff/advisors who are responding to the questionnaire. However, in the case of Spain, where representatives do not usually have many advisors, the experience is somewhat different.

In any case, surveying parliamentarians can be frustrating because of the nonresponse after all the efforts made to obtain their cooperation. We do not believe that this frustration generates animosity toward some MPs or their parties, although it is true that anticipating the nonresponse of MPs from some groups, if it finally occurs, one has the feeling of a self-fulfilling prophecy and tends to think "I thought so." One way to deal with this uncertainty is to try to ensure that sufficient information is collected to proceed with the analysis. To this end, in our works we have followed a strategy of anticipating problems in the design, access, and contact phases. However, during the fieldwork, it is necessary to get the interviewee to reflect on the issues we propose or to respond to the questions in the questionnaire. Two of the problems we have identified in the fieldwork we have carried out are that MPs may have little interest in participating in the study and, on the other hand, give little or no response.

Lack of interest in participating in the study is a problem that has led us to reflect that it is common among parliamentarians who often fail to see the short (or long) term usefulness of studies that put their work in the spotlight. Nor do they often understand that participating in these academic studies is an anonymous form of

accountability to the public. The effect can be *low participation*, reducing the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that will not be reflected in the results of the study. To reduce the impact of this problem, we have pursued several lines of action.

- (i) Illustrate the relevance of the study by pointing out that this research contributes to a better understanding of reality by facilitating a collective reflection of our world or, in the case of parliamentarians, of representative democracies. This argument is probably the least effective, given that many politicians lack knowledge about what is done in academia.
- (ii) Show the relevance of the study for the actors (parties, institutions) by suggesting that the results of the research can be beneficial to them, depending on the topic under study. For example, one can emphasize the better functioning of institutions, an enhancement in the quality of democracy, improvements in the selection of candidates, etc.
- (iii) Show the importance of the study in the political and social context in which it takes place. Sometimes it is useful to define the scenario in which the study occurs (for example, the existence of a political conflict, the negative perception of politics and its actors, the discrediting of institutions, etc.) to emphasize that a greater understanding of reality can help to provide solutions or, at least, a better knowledge of it, which is the first step toward finding solutions.
- (iv) Obtain the endorsement of a prestigious, reputable academic, who is widely recognized or, perhaps additionally, the backing of a political leader whose endorsement will only be valid for his or her colleagues.
- (v) To raise the visibility of the institution hosting the study, in our cases, they are our respective universities. For many MPs interviewed in the framework of PELA, the University of Salamanca was not only a prestigious institution, but also a university where they aspired to study a postgraduate degree. This explains why, on several occasions, MPs took pictures with the interviewers and posted them on social networks. On the other hand, some Spanish MPs have studied at UNED and have therefore shown a greater willingness to collaborate than others.

The lack of response or nonresponse sometimes hides not disinterest, but forgetfulness. It is not uncommon for parliamentarians to tell us that they started to implement the survey but did not finish it and then forgot, or that they intended to make an appointment for an interview but then forgot to do it. It is understandable that with busy schedules and multiple foci of attention, our subjects forget to respond to the questionnaire or to give us an appointment for an interview. In these circumstances, we believe that the following actions have worked well:

- (i) Send reminders by email inviting them to participate again and gently reminding them of the study's relevant aspects already included in the contact letter. Sometimes it is useful to set a deadline for participation in the study. We have found it useful to use "level of satisfaction" with the questionnaire (see previous section). As the level of satisfaction was over 85%, we were able to use

these data to launch it on social media, and mention it in reminders, to encourage other parliamentarians to respond.

- (ii) Make substitutions for non-respondents. This usually works when we are talking about purposive samples or random samples, but does not work when we are targeting the population as a whole, as no substitution is possible.
- (iii) Contacting representatives who have asked us for results by leaving a contact email and asking them to encourage other colleagues in their seats to respond. This has worked for us, and has slightly increased the response rate.
- (iv) Relying on parliamentary advisors or technical services, who often have a professional sensitiveness for the relevance of the work conducted from the academia. They can be asked, for example, to remind MPs to respond to the survey. But to do this you need to have previously developed a good relationship with these gatekeepers, which is highly recommended for the success of your research.

4 Research Ethics

According to our experience, there are two main sources in research ethics. On the one hand, there are regulations or ethical codes of professional associations that oblige researchers to follow certain channels (for example, the recommendations of the European Commission (2018) or the code of ethics of the American Sociological Association (1999)). On the other hand, there are the researchers' personal commitments to open science, anonymity, confidentiality, transparency, and feedback to study participants. Over time, we have come to realize in our work how important these beliefs are, both for integrating science into society and for engaging parliamentarians. In this context, we have observed a paradigm shift from that social scientist who observes without much accountability, to the social scientist who is aware that s/he is conducting research with taxpayers' money, who takes transparency and accountability to society as an obligation, and who intends to transmit and disseminate the results of his/her work.

Applying research ethics to the studies on parliamentarians has led us to make it a rule of conduct to provide full information to study participants and to maintain a transparent attitude. To this end, the most effective instrument we have developed are the websites of our research projects or institutes, where potential participants can obtain complete information on the research design and the progress of the studies. In our communications with MPs, we always include a link to this website.

Furthermore, for both conviction and more pragmatic reasons, we also believe that ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, as well as demonstrating that we have met these objectives in the past, is a rule that guides our studies. For example, these can include letters of recommendation that support these two principles (anonymity and confidentiality), websites that highlight the confidentiality commitments of team members, publications (also on the web) that show that the processing of information never identifies anyone individually, and publicly available databases

that do not contain anything that could identify respondents.⁷ According to some parliamentarians, this information, in combination with some other details such as the reputation of the research team, has given them the confidence to collaborate in the study.

Our teams follow the rule of accountability both to society and to those persons who participate in the study. We fulfill the former through something that is increasingly requested by academics: academic publications such as articles, books, and chapters of books, but also informative publications in the press, blogs, or via participation in television and radio programs. Accountability to MPs participating in the study has a double dimension. The latter has a double dimension. On the one hand, we offer participants the opportunity to see the results of the survey first-hand: they are sent a report of aggregated results. This, we believe, also helps to consolidate the credibility of the team and that of its individual members, as it fulfills a number of commitments made. On the other hand, in those cases where an agreement is reached with the leaders of the chamber, sessions are organized for the presentation of the data and discussion with assembly members and advisors in the months following the work. These types of actions support principles that are at the core of ethics in research: open science, anonymity, confidentiality, transparency, and ongoing contact with the study participants.

Nowadays, many universities have their own ethics committees. Like everything else in life, sometimes they work quickly and meet the needs of the researcher, sometimes less so. The conventional thing to do in these cases is to present to the committee the research question and methods and highlight how it may affect the research subjects. For example, if one does a survey, it should be explained how informed consent would be obtained. It is also normal that the ethics committee will give the go-ahead or suggest some modifications (or prevent the researcher from carrying out the project, but we do not know of any cases). A problem can arise when the committee in question does not respond, or takes too long to respond because this poses a dilemma for the researcher: should one delay the research? In our case, and we imagine that all other similar cases do the same, we decided to go ahead knowing that we complied with the rules governing research ethics. In surveys, we asked for oral recorded consent after informing the representative. The website and the introductory mailings are important for this. In all cases, consent was given (if this did occur, the survey would not go ahead). In the in-depth interviews, recording of the interview was requested and the MP was asked to confirm that they gave consent and that they were explained the details of the research. In one of our studies, an MP refused to be recorded, but a paper form was available to sign the consent form, and the interviewer took notes during the interview and then completed them later with what he or she remembered from the interview.

⁷PELA's databases are placed at <https://oir.org.es/pela/> one year after finishing the fieldwork. They are fully available to the scientific community. Data from the surveys to Spanish MPs (anonymized databases) are deposited at the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (www.cis.es) where they are openly available. More information can be found at <https://zenodo.org/communities/consenso/?page=1&size=20>

When dealing with people in positions of power, we can expect attempts to control or influence the research results, especially when the aggregate results will be made public. For example, party leaders may have an interest in ensuring that their parliamentarians do not appear too radical or too moderate, and may therefore try to exert some kind of influence or pressure to adjust the results to their wishes. At the same time, when dealing with sensitive populations, the university or research center hosting the research team may have an interest in not upsetting—or, conversely, on upsetting—people on whose decisions their future, budget allocation, growth, etc. may depend. To our knowledge, we have never faced this kind of problem nor felt any kind of pressure, either at the beginning of our careers—when we were most vulnerable to such attempts—or afterwards. Anyway, we do not think that the pressure would have worked either...

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

In short, in our experience, research with parliamentarians requires a number of steps to ensure that the work is successful. We have elaborated on the steps that we have followed in our work to deal with anticipated or experienced problems.

- (i) Be clear about the research topic and how to approach it.
- (ii) Develop a set of questions to help get the required information.
- (iii) Select the people to contact to obtain information. Sample building may follow different criteria, but it is useful to have clear criteria in place.
- (iv) Contact is a key step, as this is where the credentials of the research team are presented, the nature of the study is explained, guarantees of anonymity are given, and participation in the study is requested. A letter should be sent by post, accompanied by a follow-up email. The ultimate goal is to get the cooperation of the person you are contacting. A letter of support or endorsement from a prestigious academic or political leader (specifically aimed at their colleagues) is never a bad idea.
- (v) Sending emails or making phone calls to reinforce the letter of introduction and set a date for the interview. This practice is more common in qualitative studies with generally lesser-motivated sample groups.
- (vi) In sample studies, it is useful to previously introduce the study to people with institutional weight—e.g., Parliamentary Speakers, spokespersons, political leaders, etc. —in order to ask for their help in conducting the study, and to encourage them to help motivate their colleagues to participate.
- (vii) Schedule interviews and set a time frame for fieldwork.
- (viii) In sample surveys, it is useful to send reminders to complete the questionnaire. It is common for parliamentarians to postpone this task and then forget.
- (ix) Obtain the consent of the interviewee and keep a record of it.

As in all things, once the steps have been defined, a number of elements need to be in place in order to successfully complete the study. Based on our experience, these include:

- (i) The project website. The aim is to refer interested people to a web page that includes an account of the team conducting the research, the way in which the study is carried out (the methodology), the objectives, the sponsoring bodies, the publications resulting from the research project, news about the study in the media, the commitment to anonymity and research ethics, commitment to confidentiality, etc. The aim of this website is to serve as a letter of introduction and to help resolve doubts and encourage participation in the study. Although there are many, two examples are: <https://oir.org.es/pela/> and <https://consenso.uned.es/>
- (ii) An institutional e-mail address (not personal) to establish contact with the research team.
- (iii) A confidentiality undertaking, signed by the research team.
- (iv) In the case of qualitative studies, a list to identify each person interviewed.
- (v) A standard letter of introduction that is usually tailored according to the sex of the person, party, or any other relevant characteristic.
- (vi) Sample reminder emails in the case of sample surveys.
- (vii) Interview script and/or questionnaire. In both cases, the purpose and nature of the survey should be explained to the respondent.
- (viii) Timetable shared by the whole research team to keep in mind the phases of the study and each person's responsibilities.

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Part II
The Invisible

Chapter 7

Challenges and Complexities When Researching Vulnerable Populations and Sensitive Topics: Working with Women Experiencing Violence and Homelessness



Helena Menih 

Research which aims to bring the voices of vulnerable and marginalised women to the forefront can be quite challenging to conduct but also rewarding. The unique experiences of this group present complexities before, during, and even after fieldwork. To ensure participants' emotional well-being, and to highlight the issues that are raised during the research, ethical considerations and fieldwork preparation are essential. These steps allow the researcher to recognise the potential challenges and complexities.

The focus of discussion throughout this chapter is on two projects: Project 1 – an ethnographic study of women experiencing homelessness due to domestic and family violence (DFV); and Project 2 – semi-structured interviews with staff working at a rural shelter for women experiencing homelessness. Both projects were conducted in Australia, and I outline these details in the next section. It is also important to emphasise that in this chapter I use *person-first language*. This means I refer to *women experiencing homelessness* rather than *homeless women*, which indicates deliberately that homelessness is a condition rather than a totalising, individual descriptor.

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1 Definition of the Phenomenon or Population and Research Context

This section briefly outlines DFV and homelessness, and the importance of homelessness services in the Australian context. More specifically, as women were the primary focus of the research, gender is contextualised within these key definitions.

DFV and homelessness are two closely related and detrimental social issues around the globe. Whilst violence and homelessness can impact any individual – no matter their age, sex, ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, or sexuality – it is widely considered still to be gendered, and primarily affecting women. In Australia, national data show that 17% (or 1.7 million) of women experience physical or sexual violence; and 23% (or 2.3 million) of women experience emotional abuse, which tends to occur in addition to physical abuse (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023). Whilst there is no single and agreed-upon definition when it comes to DFV, it has been acknowledged that the central element of this violence is behaviour motivated by gender drivers, which can involve seeking control of a partner through fear, coercion, or intimidation (AIHW, 2023). DFV has been identified as the primary contributing factor for women and children leaving their homes and being at risk of homelessness (AIHW, 2023; Menih, 2021). Victims fleeing DFV, more specifically women and children, are in a highly vulnerable state and thus have been labelled as a national homelessness priority group in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2018).

In broad terms, a cultural definition of homelessness points to the identification of three sections of the homeless population: primary, secondary, and tertiary homelessness. Primary homelessness encompasses those without conventional accommodation (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992), whilst secondary homelessness includes people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2009), and finally, tertiary homelessness encompasses people who live in boarding houses on a medium- to long-term basis, defined operationally as 13 weeks or longer (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2009). However, Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) point out there will always be individual people experiencing homelessness who are hard to classify.

When it comes to assisting those experiencing homelessness, or at risk of experiencing homelessness, homelessness services play a crucial role (AIHW, 2020). These service providers – as framed in my research – tend to offer different types of assistance, which in most cases tend to be essential in helping individuals establish stability in their lives. More specifically, the support focuses on client needs, accommodation, referrals, programs – addressing issues such as substance use/abuse, victimisation, financial struggles, and well-being (AIHW, 2020). These are especially integral in the lives of women who have experienced violence.

1.1 Project 1: Ethnographic Research with Women Experiencing Homelessness Due to DFV

Guided by a literature review, I decided to undertake an ethnographic study of women experiencing homelessness – with a focus on experiences of DFV contributing to homelessness – as part of my PhD. As traditional qualitative approaches often assume a social perspective and then seek to understand the meaning of this world for participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), my intent was to engage directly with participants and try to gain an understanding of their experiences. The methodological literature shows that it is through a set of interpretative material practices that the researcher makes the world visible, and words turn the world into a series of representations (Bryman, 2004). For me, that meant that I would be able to use participants' descriptions and words to interpret how they see and experience their world.

Qualitative research involves an interpretative and naturalistic approach in a setting that is not created for the purpose of the research (Hammersley, 1989). With that, the world can be better represented as it is. For example, by adopting a grounded theory approach, people's points of view are documented through a series of descriptive accounts and then interpreted into a reasonable conclusion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As this research was exploratory in nature, I decided to employ such an approach, which means I entered the field with proposed aims rather than specific research questions (Birks & Mills, 2015). Thus, my project consisted of three overarching aims: (i) to explore reasons and pathways into homelessness; (ii) to explore women's experiences of homelessness that are grounded in their identities; and (iii) to explore how these women experience public spaces and how they negotiate and manage their spatialised selves. In this sense, a qualitative approach plays an essential role in understanding various aspects of social life (Lamont & White, 2009). Such an approach was adopted to seek comprehension of the meanings that women experiencing homelessness ascribe to their lives, to understand how they see the world and their place within it.

Guided by the research aims, I developed an ethnographic fieldwork project using participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth life-history interviews. Participant observation and in-depth interviewing provided a flexible and unobtrusive way to investigate the meanings women ascribe to their lives in the city, and to understand how they see the world and their place within it (Davies, 2008). This methodology is recommended for research into vulnerable populations, such as women experiencing homelessness (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Martin & Kunnen, 2008; Menih, 2013, 2020; Terui & Hsieh, 2016; Rose & Johnson, 2017).

Upon gaining approval from my university's Human Research Ethics Committee, I commenced the fieldwork. Overall, I spent ten months in inner-city Brisbane (in the Australian state of Queensland) familiarising myself with homelessness services and learning about the lives of women experiencing homelessness. My fieldwork was split into two main stages. For the first part, I mainly communicated with service providers, who introduced me to women experiencing homelessness and took me to places that tended to be occupied by women who lacked conventional

housing. Once I was familiar with these locations (which included bus stops, specific public parks, and food vans), I spent approximately eight months ‘hanging around’ and talking to the women who occupied these spaces at various times. Initially, it was hard to identify the women who were experiencing homelessness; however, with the help of service providers, I eventually got to know a few women who were moving between these places. I was then able to develop relationships that enabled me to ask some of the women about their life stories. During this time approximately 80 women spoke to me informally and were not recorded while ten consented to recorded life-history interviews.

While detailed demographic information was not collected, all the women provided specific background details during the interviews. Two women were aged in their early 60 s, one in her mid-50 s, four in their early to mid-40 s, two in their mid-30 s, and one young woman had only just turned 19. Three of the women identified as Indigenous Australians, and two women indicated that they came from New Zealand, with one identifying as Māori. Of the ten women, only one identified herself as being married (experiencing homelessness in partnership with her husband); all the other women emphasised that they were single. All interviews were verbatim transcribed and de-identified (all the women were given a pseudonym). These transcriptions in addition to fieldwork notes (which included all the informal conversation notes) were then analysed thematically as posited by Braun et al. (2014).

1.2 Project 2: Experiences of Staff Working in a Homelessness Service for Women in a Rural Area

Guided by the literature review and recent societal issues, there is an urgent need to explore and remove the barriers to accessing specific homelessness services for women experiencing DFV in rural contexts. I designed Project 2 as an established researcher working at a university and was conducted in a rural town in Australia (to ensure confidentiality, the specific location of the service is omitted – this is common when researching locations or participants in areas that have traits/characteristics that can have specific identifying features). This project aimed to clarify the complex nature of their female clients; the type of support needed; the main barriers to accessing the service; and finally, the main issues staff experience when dealing with homeless women experiencing DFV.

A qualitative approach was employed; more specifically semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth knowledge on the topic. This project was devised as a case study, from which an Australia-wide study might then be developed. By collaborating with, and taking in the perspective of, a service provider, the aim was to contribute to an understanding of these problems and of potential solutions for homelessness services more broadly.

Upon gaining approval from my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee, I began with recruitment and scheduled interviews. The overall fieldwork for this project only lasted approximately two weeks – this included meetings, recruitment,

and interviews. For the purposes of convenience, all the interviews were conducted at the premises of the service. Overall, 11 participants – all female staff – were interviewed. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analysed thematically.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

Any project including fieldwork requires careful consideration as to how it will be carried out. Even when a project does not directly involve participation by vulnerable populations, if the topic is of a sensitive nature, careful planning and implementation of the fieldwork phase ensure the project is ethical and respectful to the participants and the topic. The following section is divided into four phases: preparation and planning; recruitment; data collection; and data analysis.

2.1 Preparation and Planning

The main element that guides any research project is a clear question and/or aim. This then drives the researcher to select a methodological approach (or approaches) that will enable effective data collection. The preparation process ensures all the key aspects of fieldwork are considered before data collection takes place; including thinking about the participant(s), ethical clearance, and any particular materials required. This is especially true when researching vulnerable groups or topics.

When I was planning my fieldwork for Project 1 as a PhD student, participant characteristics – women who have experienced DFV and were currently experiencing or had, in the past, experienced homelessness – were my top priority. For example, one of the key considerations for the ethics process and recruitment was their relationship with authorities. Women who are experiencing homelessness due to DFV are generally distrustful of authority. This might be due to the fear of harm and stigmatisation. I needed to consider carefully how I would approach these vulnerable women and develop sufficient trust that they would be willing to tell me their stories. This aspect guided how I approached ethical application (addressed later in the chapter), interview questions, and recruitment strategy.

During my planning stages for Project 1, I met with an expert on homelessness (an established researcher) and a staff member at a homelessness service (the manager of one of the Brisbane services) to inform what steps to take to ensure my research was conducted in an ethical manner. These two individuals provided beneficial advice in terms of the issues of access to women experiencing homelessness due to their vulnerability. As a PhD student, this was valuable as it highlighted some of the issues that might arise during my ethics application process and actual recruitment. The most useful advice, however, was to explore the possibility of ‘talking’ to a woman who has experienced homelessness. The manager of the service pointed me to an

online forum where individuals who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness use to connect. Thus, I created a new forum discussion asking for help – I was very honest as to who I was and what my intention was. A young woman who responded later became my ‘cultural consultant’ (a person with insider knowledge).

Cultural consultants can offer invaluable contributions and knowledge of the studied field, especially in locating participants. I conducted a sensitising interview with a cultural consultant. I set up a meeting with a young woman whom I shall name Rose. During our communication, she explained that she had exited homelessness recently, but she experienced homelessness on-and-off for about three years. We met at one of the offices on the campus where I was based as a PhD student. The interview was not recorded, and, in a conversational format, it lasted for an hour. During the interview we discussed various topics and mainly considered Rose’s reasons for and pathways into homelessness, her experiences, and her exit from homelessness. This interview proved extremely valuable as it shaped my understanding of the interview questioning – especially how the issues I planned to explore are intertwined and the importance of exploring a bigger picture. In addition, it also provided me with some advice in terms of approaching women to conduct interviews. Rose explained that life on the street can be isolating, and a listening ear is always welcomed. She also emphasised that most women are always ‘on the go’ and it might be hard engaging with them initially, but once I did, it would be easier to locate them again.

During my planning stage for Project 2, the key consideration on my mind was the location and the staff I planned to interview. The ethics application process was much less demanding than for Project 1. For example, for Project 2, the participants did not directly experience homelessness due to DFV, but they did work with women who had. Thus, I recognised that because of their work, there are potential experiences of vicarious trauma, which became the biggest ethical concern (this will be addressed later in the chapter). In my planning I engaged with resources around vicarious trauma, and I also researched what strategies the service itself had in place to govern such issues, to be consistent with guidance around managing approaches.

My planning for Project 2 also included a recruitment plan. This was done by attending a staff meeting and introducing myself (as a university researcher) and the project. This stage also required a lot of communication with different staff members to establish a reciprocal relationship – but to also ensure that even though they were located in a small town, I would take every precaution to ensure the information they provided, and their identities would be de-identified. The manager of the service then further encouraged the staff to participate – this did come into consideration in the ethics application (which will be addressed later in the chapter). Project 2 was also more structured, meaning that I was able to determine an exact location (which was the service’s premises) for the interviews and set a specific time.

Both projects involved detailed attention and unique considerations during my planning stage. The main difference between these two was the nature of the research; the nature and characteristics of participants; and, more specifically, the setting of the fieldwork. For my projects, these were the key elements requiring deliberations.

2.2 *Recruitment*

Recruitment is another essential component of the fieldwork phase, and as researchers, this is when we must ensure we approach our potential participants in an ethical and sensitive manner – this is especially true when researching vulnerable groups or sensitive topics. While recruitment processes need to be specified clearly in ethics applications, what many researchers learn is that, when in the field, human nature is unpredictable, and things might not always go as planned (Menih, 2013). This just reinforces the importance of the previous, planning phase.

For Project 1, my recruitment initially did not involve any ‘gatekeepers’. My plan was to spend time around places where women experiencing homelessness might be spending time – such as various homelessness services. I could say that this might have stemmed from my inexperience as a researcher, as I quickly realised that I cannot just go up to someone ‘assuming’ they are experiencing homelessness. In my planning stage, I was too focused on the distrust women experiencing homelessness have towards authorities, and I assumed it would be debilitating to my recruitment if I used homelessness services as an access point. Thus, my planning stage led me to change my approach to my fieldwork to spend the first few weeks ‘hanging around’ different homelessness services to not only to familiarise myself with the field but also to introduce myself (or to be introduced) to potential participants and establish initial contacts. I expand on this below where I discuss fieldwork phases. This demonstrated to me that, as researchers, it is crucial to acknowledge that recruitment processes may need to be adjusted, but also to recognise how important participant characteristics are (as pointed out above in the planning stage) and how we need to consider these during the planning and recruitment phases. These help us to consider the potential challenges and barriers likely to be encountered.

On the other hand, the recruitment for Project 2 was very different. This process felt a lot easier and more straightforward. I was very clear that the project was not commissioned by the service or management; thus, their participation, or decision not to participate, would not have any impact on their working status and position. This is relevant to the issue of power dynamics, which is further explored below in the ethics section. Additionally, as this project was undertaken in a small rural town, it was important to communicate to the potential participants that participation would not have any implications for their position in the community. When I met with these women at a staff meeting, this was one of the concerns they expressed.

Part of the recruitment process is also obtaining informed consent – this is in place to ensure that participants have the necessary information and support to make informed decisions about their participation in research. This involves explaining the methodology, the potential risks as well as benefits of participation. One of the most important elements of this process is ensuring the participants know that the information they provide to the researcher is confidential and will be de-identified; and that if at any stage they feel uncomfortable with the research, they can withdraw.

For Project 1, I did expect that there might be issues with literacy and thus it was explicitly outlined in the information sheet and informed consent document that this can be obtained verbally and witnessed accordingly. However, all the women were able to provide written consent. I did, however, read out all the conditions with them and explained in very plain language what their participation would involve. This was advice I received from my supervisor, and it proved beneficial. I was hesitant to just blindly trust that all the participants would understand what project participation entailed, and I believe that being explicit with them as to what exactly their participation involved (such as recorded interviews, potential triggering questions, and potential follow-up sessions) also provided a segue into a trusting relationship.

My recruitment for Project 1 also did not involve any incentives. While I was provided with some advice around this (from various forums/workshops I attended as a PhD student) and the benefits were emphasised, I decided against this. I believed that participants' sincerity might be compromised if any financial incentives were offered. During my recruitment, I was never asked what their gain would be, which only reinforced that my decision was correct. However, I did end up offering tea/coffee and biscuits during the interview.

For Project 2, obtaining informed consent did not present with any major issues. The only concern was around confidentiality. This was my expectation, and I took time to explain to the participants that any information they would provide would be deidentified; and that if they discussed anything that they believed could be compromising to their position at the service (for example their personal views of the manager), it would not be raised with their manager and would stay confidential. Additionally, women were a bit worried about any information 'leaking' into the community. This was a valid concern due to the project being undertaken in a small town. I again ensured that their participation would stay confidential.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection is a significant element of the fieldwork phase which, when working with vulnerable participants and exploring sensitive topics, needs to be conducted with special care. This is a phase where a researcher ensures data will be collected in ethical ways, sensitive to the experiences and needs of participants. This can be done by developing a clear and ethical data collection plan, which outlines the methods that will be used to collect data.

For both of my projects I conducted interviews, which required careful consideration of what type of questions would be the best to safeguard participants' well-being, but also to obtain the best information possible. It was also important to consider what questions would help develop a reciprocal conversation to best enable straightforward data collection. Methodologically, there are approaches that can aid in developing this trust, such as informal conversations.

In my data collection for Project 1, informal conversations proved to be very beneficial and assisted in developing trust. These conversations occurred planned

but also randomly. For example, on Wednesday evenings I attended a shelter that accommodated women overnight in their program 'crash-beds'. This means that women who were experiencing homelessness or DFV or both could come, and 'crash' and no questions would be asked. They were offered a shower, clean clothes, a warm meal, and a bed for the night. I attended these nights regularly from 6 p.m. to about midnight for a few months. After a few weeks, though, some women became regular visitors and started having regular conversations with me. Many times, these occurred out on the balcony where they went for a smoke; or in front of the TV; or even at a dining table during their meal (while I did not consume food myself, I had tea and sat with them).

Another setting for informal conversation was outside a homelessness service where I spent some time. Because women became familiar with who I was, they started talking to me and telling me about their days. I also attended free art classes that were set up for any people experiencing homelessness; these provided a lot of opportunities for informal conversations. I still remember one Monday morning attending a session with women only (most times there was one older man present, but on this day, he was not there) and the conversations ranged from talking about trauma, to a TV soap opera, to family, to joking about the haircut one woman got (by a friend), to their plans to meet with a staff member to discuss their cases. I found those art sessions beneficial because the attitude was very supportive, and the conversation never stopped. I only found out about these sessions from an informal chat I had with a woman at a different service when she was telling me about her day and pointed out these art sessions.

During Project 1, one of the challenges that was quite significant during my data collection was maintaining an empathetic and supportive approach. This is very testing because a researcher must also ensure the relationship between the researcher and participant does not become blurred. When researching women who have experienced violence, data collection can be quite unpredictable and during interviews or informal conversations, participants might present erratically, or emotionally, or even in a completely withdrawn fashion. I have certainly experienced all these possibilities but because of my preparation, I was able to always react in an appropriate and supportive manner, in order to address participants' emotional and psychological needs, allowing for data collection to continue. For example, one of my younger participants talked about her sexual assault that occurred during her homelessness, and as she described the details, she started to get a bit distressed. I noticed this because her voice started trembling and she began to move around. When she paused, I asked her if she needed a break. She agreed to a break, and we stepped outside, where she had a cigarette. During this break, I decided to change the topic, so she could have an emotional break from the traumatic event. Our chat was about her current partner, and she told me how they met and what their first date was. After she finished with her cigarette, we went back to the interview room and resumed our interview.

For Project 1 data collection ended upon the completion of my fieldwork. Whilst I was enjoying my fieldwork, I felt that the data I collected was comprehensive and it was time to conclude this stage of my project. Additionally, the 10-month mark of

the fieldwork was around mid-December, during which time I planned to take one month off to visit my family overseas. Thus, in the last month of my fieldwork, I communicated to my participants that I will soon be finishing up with my daily visits and told them how to contact me (I gave them a card with my name, email, and my office phone number) should they wish to stay in touch. Even so, none of the participants contacted me after I exited the field.

Whilst data collection for Project 2 was quite different, as it was more structured and less triggering, there were still issues. I needed to consider the implications of the organisation – the homelessness service participants worked for – and how that might shape participants' willingness to offer detailed information. I could see some hesitation, especially when the questions were focused on more structural aspects – for example focusing on the service's processes, financial aspects, or how their service cooperates with other services. When asking such questions, some participants asked, 'will this be recorded'. I explained that if they were concerned, I could stop the recording. However, I also emphasised that I would de-identify their words, and any identifying features, and that if there was any specific information that would be like to identify them, it would not be used, or would be phrased in such a way as not to identify them.

It was clear that for Project 2 participants, one key challenge was around privacy and confidentiality. Even though, during the recruitment and informed consent process, I emphasised the privacy and confidentiality aspect, this concern continued to arise during the interviews. Interestingly, this was important to the participants, not because of the sensitive topics, but because they felt uneasy about any of their words being reported back to the service management. It seemed they feared that their position might be in jeopardy if their superiors found out about any issues they might have raised during the interviews. I reassured them that my project was independent and was not funded or commissioned by the management department of their organisation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a vital component of fieldwork and, as researchers, we must guarantee that our approach to analysing the data is rigorous and sensible. We must consider the experiences and needs of our participants. To do this, a clear data analysis plan needs to be put in place during the planning stage but, for both of my projects, my analysis began as soon as I entered the field and was not inflexible, nor something left until last.

Taking into consideration the experience of victimisation and trauma, vicarious trauma, and other experiences of vulnerability, it was essential to approach the data analysis process in an ethical manner. Data analysis for me was fluid and ongoing. In the field, I was constantly thinking about the topics, questions being asked, and observations being made, and this informed my data collection and further analysis – which continued after I exited the field. While the plan was to use software

(NVivo) to aid with analysis, all my initial analysis was done via basic reading and rereading of transcribed materials and field notes. I outsourced the transcriptions with a company that dealt with transcribing sensitive materials. I submitted these online and added a note indicating a trigger warning and specified how to label the transcripts (with a pseudonym). Once I received the full transcription, I checked these by listening to the recordings and reading the transcriptions. I coded my transcriptions, manually, enabling me to think about the themes more broadly. After the initial analysis, all transcripts (and field notes for Project 1) were then imported into NVivo for further analysis.

3 Techniques Employed

This section focuses on describing in detail the techniques I employed in my fieldwork. First, I discuss participant observation undertaken in Project 1, and second, interviewing (life-history and semi-structured) for both projects.

3.1 Participant Observation

The aim of observation is to describe a behaviour sequence. Participant observation is a method of data collection over a defined period, and it is achieved through watching, listening, and asking questions of a group of people as they go about their daily lives (Payne & Payne, 2004). Davies (2008) describes the classic form of participant observation as consisting of a single researcher spending an extended period living amongst the people who are being studied. While in undertaking Project 1, I did not live amongst my participants, I did, however, spend almost every day for 10 months around some key homelessness services, in shelters, and certain public spaces, such as parks and bus stops. Then – as an international PhD student in Australia in my late twenties – I, unfortunately, could not extend my fieldwork as I had visa restrictions attached to the length of my stay.

My fieldwork was split into two main stages. For the first part, I mainly communicated with staff at homelessness services, who introduced me to women experiencing homelessness – usually at the service location but also took me to places that tended to be occupied by these women. In most cases, these locations were busy public parks and bus stops, food vans, and other service locations. In this instance, staff from homelessness services played a role as my gatekeepers. They introduced me to the women they knew; women who were accessing their services. I always made sure I introduced myself as a student and emphasised that I do not work at the service. Once I got to know a few women, fieldwork became easier, in part because I did not have to rely on service staff.

Once I was familiar with locations, I commenced the second stage and spent approximately eight months ‘hanging around’ and talking to the women who occupied these spaces at various times. Hanging around meant just that: being around

women, talking to them, sitting, or walking around. Even though the Ethics Committee suggested I wear a name badge and a university-labelled shirt (which was red in colour), I did not wear a name tag and all my clothing was very casual (usually jeans and a shirt/hoodie). My decision was based on the fact that I did not want to be 'illuminated' as an outsider, instead, my choices of clothing were to be as 'normal' as possible – which was my usual casual dressing code during my late twenties. As I believed that participating in the daily lives of those relevant to the research area would provide me with a more complete understanding of the cultural meanings and social structures of the studied group, and the interrelation between these (Davies, 2008), I needed to ensure that I was present at different locations and at different times. For example, I attended 'crash nights' at a shelter on Wednesdays from 6 p.m. until midnight; I attended Monday morning art classes from 9 a.m. until midday; I attended an overnight 'from street to home' outreach program on Saturdays from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m.; I attended public parks and certain bus stops on various days anywhere between 10 a.m. until 5 p.m.; I attended different homelessness services on different days during their opening hours. With so many different locations, I did feel my lifestyle became quite transient during that time – which is one of the characteristics of my participants.

I need to emphasise that when I attended certain locations at certain times, especially during evening hours, I was always accompanied by a staff member from a homelessness service. This was due to concerns as to my physical safety, and I needed to comply with this ethical concern (explained in the next section). Even while I did not necessarily agree that this was necessary, as a woman in a public space during the night-time I understood this space and time presents its dangers.

Before I entered the field for Project 1, I had to consider what role I would play in my approach. There are different classifications of participant observation, which are based on the level of involvement that the researcher has with the group studied. According to Spradley (1980), there are five different degrees of involvement with people and activities, and the one I employed in my research was a *moderate* role. This meant that I balanced between being an 'insider and an outsider'. Put simply, I was not a stranger to the women in my research, but I also did not cross certain boundaries. I made it clear that I was not working with any service providers and that my research was independent of them. I avoided certain activities that could have been considered as 'blurring the lines' between a moderate and active participant.

This was challenging at times, and it required ethical reflection. For example, one of the women who was showing me how her daily routine went, took me to a public park and pulled out of her bag a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of cola, which she then mixed in a plastic drinking bottle. She passed it to me, but I had to decline; not only was this against the law (in Brisbane, Queensland, drinking in a public space can result in an on-the-spot fine), but this would also impede my ability to continue with my fieldwork, physically and mentally. In addition to considering my role as a researcher, I also had also to be aware of the ethical dilemma of illegal activity. In the ethics application, I explained that if any participants engaged in illegal behaviour while in the field, I would shift my gaze intentionally, so as not to

observe these activities, and note that the illegal behaviour in which the participant might be involved – and which might cause serious harm (physical or psychological) to another person or herself – would be reported to the service providers in the first instance (not to the police).

Every day after I exited the field, I recorded my notes in a fieldwork journal. The method of taking brief notes while in the field and compiling a fieldwork journal can lead to some inconsistencies between what was observed and what was later recorded, yet the literature recognises these data as appropriate (Brewer, 2000; Bryman, 2004; Emerson et al. 2001). A fieldwork journal contains a record of all the experiences that occurred during fieldwork and once the fieldwork concludes and a concentrated effort at the analysis of the study begins, the fieldwork journal becomes an important source of data (Schensul et al., 1999). My journal included detailed notes of the informal conversations. I found this very beneficial for my data analysis.

3.2 Interviewing

Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) indicate the use of qualitative methods as the best way to obtain an in-depth account of people experiencing homelessness. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the lives of women experiencing homelessness, the most appropriate method, in addition to observations, is in-depth interviewing. So, for Project 1, in-depth life-history interviewing was undertaken. To understand what had happened in their lives that had led them to be in the situation they were in, I needed to explore the women's pasts as well as their present, and their ideas of the future. In addition, this type of interview also offered these women an opportunity to be heard.

In the early phase of the participant observation process for Project 1, I began to develop relationships that aided in my interview recruitment. While initially, I determined that I wanted to have only a sample of women who were single and experiencing homelessness, this proved difficult. All the women I came across in the field had some relationships or familial attachments in their lives – for example they had children that were in care (either foster or with their families). Thus, I determined that I would interview any women who would be willing to sit down with me and do a recorded interview. Because the aim was to gain an understanding of their life choices, past and present, it was expected that the interviews would either take a long time or would be conducted over one or two sessions. Consequently, I believed that this might present challenges when setting up interviews. Interestingly, of the ten women who consented to the interviews, all but one spoke to me for anywhere between two and four hours per session. Out of the ten participants, I had two sessions with five of them. Only one participant became a bit withdrawn and only completed one recorded session with me for approximately one hour – I did, however, have several informal conversations with her.

For Project 1, I asked all the participants if they would be keen to come to one of the locations of a homelessness service to conduct the interview; the reason being

that the public space – such as a coffee shop, or a park – would be noisy and present with other challenges (lack of privacy). Whilst there were some difficulties with some women arriving punctually, I conducted most of the interviews at two homelessness services (different locations), some at a shelter and one at a woman's home – she was in temporary accommodation after 12 years of experiencing homelessness.

For Project 2, recruitment and arranging times for interviews was quite straightforward. All the interviews were scheduled for one week on different days and at different times. For convenience, all the interviews were conducted at the premises of the service. The interviews included open-ended as well as structured questions. Open-ended questions allowed me to explore staff members' experiences and perceptions of key issues that women accessing their services might be experiencing. Overall, 11 participants were interviewed. All the interviews were recorded, lasted between 60 and 120 min, and were then transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Thematic Data Analysis

For Project 1, the fieldwork journal and verbatim transcriptions of the recorded interviews were the main sources of data for my analysis. While preliminary analysis commenced as soon as the fieldwork started and was ongoing, a second and larger analysis stage commenced after the fieldwork finished and all the interviews and notes were properly transcribed. To aid my analysis, I used the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. This program works on a code-and-retrieve theme basis, which allowed me to cross-check themes. During the analysis, I focused on repetitions, similarities, differences, metaphors, and analogies (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), which enabled me to reflect on the codes to better understand the connection between them. Overall, numerous themes and sub-themes emerged during the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For Project 2, once all the interviews had been transcribed and checked, they were then imported into NVivo for analysis. Coding was based on the key themes that guided the research and topics arising during the interviews. In the analytical phase of this project, it was very important to ensure that all the information was correctly and carefully de-identified – as the project was undertaken in a small rural town, it was integral that the confidentiality of the participants was guaranteed.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

Researching sensitive topics and working with vulnerable populations, such as women experiencing homelessness due to violence, presents a range of ethical and emotional challenges and complexities. These must be considered carefully at every stage of the research – at the start, during the fieldwork, and at the end. This section focuses firstly on ethical aspects, and secondly on emotional aspects, of my fieldwork.

4.1 *Ethical Aspects*

For decades now, qualitative research methods have been used to explore the viewpoints and experiences of disempowered populations. In recent years, however, the research of vulnerable groups has started to present with difficulties even before reaching the fieldwork phase. Obtaining clearance from ethics committees has become increasingly time-consuming, tedious, and restrictive. While vulnerable groups need to be protected and should be treated with respect and care, it is also important to recognise that having been ‘silenced’, discriminated against, stigmatised, marginalised, and made ‘invisible’, many of these individuals first and foremost wish is for their voices to be heard. Research employing fieldwork qualitative methods, such as informal conversations or interviewing, offers the participants to tell their stories.

When researching women who are experiencing homelessness due to DFV and/or sensitive topics, there are several ethical concerns that must be taken into consideration. From the start, these have an impact on the project – either in the planning stage, during the implementation of the project, or when the interpretation of results occurs. What is essential to remember is, if these are not properly considered and addressed, this can affect the validity of the results, and – more importantly – harm can be caused to participants, or even the researcher.

In the above sections, certain ethical aspects have already been recognised, such as confidentiality, recruitment, and informed consent. This section will expand on the additional ethical elements that proved significant for the two projects such as emotional safety for participants and researchers, representation, and power dynamics. As will be demonstrated, many of the ethical issues crossover, and have to be considered holistically; so, reflecting on these throughout the fieldwork is essential.

For both projects, I needed to consider the implications of trauma and harm; more specifically, how participants and the researcher’s emotional well-being can be protected from any harm. For participants who have experienced trauma or vicarious trauma, revisiting certain topics can be ‘triggering’. Even though we may take precautions in the planning stages of a project, trauma is complex and requires serious consideration at every step of the project.

As researchers, we have a responsibility to develop a plan that will mitigate potential ethical issues, such as endangering participants’ and researcher’s emotional safety. One of the main recommended steps to manage potential emotional discomfort for a participant is to have a contact for a counselling service available during the interview. That, however, does not always address a problem that might be immediate. An example from my Project 1 fieldwork: a participant broke down in tears, but for her, it was not because we were discussing her past victimisation; it was not because our conversation triggered something; it was because she was angry at herself that she did not exercise her agency in the relationship to avoid the sudden transition to homelessness. This is not my assumption: these were her words. She explained this to me after I recommended a counselling service.

Similarly, in Project 2, I was aware that vicarious trauma might present as a problem. Part of the managing strategy was to recommend counselling, but also to approach the management team at the service if further strategies need to be developed – to continue working effectively and to address any potential vicarious trauma that might arise after the interview. I expected that some of the stories the participants might refer to might be triggering, therefore I asked them at the beginning, as professional staff, how would they prefer to be treated when this occurs. While most stated that they do not see this being problematic, two women expressed that if they feel distressed, they would appreciate the interview being paused.

At the same time, when I developed plans to manage participants' emotional safety, I also always developed a plan as to how to manage my own emotional well-being. This included regular debriefing sessions with my colleagues (when undertaking research as an established researcher) and supervisor (during my PhD studies); writing a personal debrief diary in addition to field notes; and reaching out to counselling if-and-when required. For both projects these were the steps outlined, but for both, regular debrief sessions have seemed sufficient.

When considering emotional safety for the participants and for myself, I was very cautious about boundaries. It was important to demonstrate an empathetic and supportive attitude, but I needed to ensure this was not mistaken for friendship. At the same time, I did need to remember that power dynamics are a factor when it comes to working with women experiencing certain vulnerabilities. Any time a participant felt vulnerable, there was a danger that because of power dynamics, her vulnerabilities would have been exacerbated. During the fieldwork, I always deemed any contact or conversation to have the potential for power imbalances and thus I took steps to address this.

Power dynamics and emotional safety for the participants and myself were all crucial in the relationships I formed during my fieldwork. What is even more significant is how these are nurtured and managed. Managing this relationship is imperative as it can influence the nature of the fieldwork and can also affect the ethos of the research process. For Project 1, I made it clear that I was a student researcher and was also realistic as to what might occur after I would exit the field and when the research would end. Participants appreciated my honesty, and, for vulnerable participants, this was always my approach – to be honest. For Project 2, the context was different, due to being in a small rural town. I was very clear that anything that would occur during the interview would not have any impact on our relationship outside of the community. Consequently, how we manage these relationships and the boundaries we set, can impact on how we represent the participants.

When thinking about representation, the use of terminology is important to consider when working with vulnerable and marginalised populations. As researchers, we need to avoid negative portrayals that could further reinforce harmful stereotyping. It is our responsibility to ensure that the representation of the information collected is accurate, but also respectful. Moreover, representation does not only refer to the language and terminology we use but also to how objectively we are depicting the experiences of our participants. For example, for Project 1, it was important to represent my participants as women first, and not according to their traits (this is why I also use person-first language).

4.2 *Emotional Aspects*

In any research, the researcher must recognise and consider their own reflexivity. While in most cases, the personal element usually comes to the forefront in the analysis stage, when the objectivity of the analysis is questioned, this needs to be considered at every stage of the project. This is especially true when working with vulnerable participants, such as women experiencing homelessness due to DFV or researching sensitive topics.

Usually, the topic researchers engage with tends to be guided by their personal experiences or interest. This can be risky, potentially, but it can also be beneficial – depending on how well the researcher can manage their objectivity. Since ethnographic work is primarily based on fieldwork experience (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), personal history related to the research area, disciplinary focus, and broader socio-cultural circumstances, have profound effects on the topics covered and people selected for study (Davies, 2008).

Due to the sensitive nature of the research I conducted, there was a need to recognise feminist reflections on the research process. Feminist scholars acknowledge the links between relationships and values (Morawski, 1990) and how these are situated in the context of class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Collins, 1990; Hurd, 1998). I identify as a woman, and I have always been vocal and an advocate for the issues of social inequality experienced by women in various facets of their lives. While I recognise that my gender identity means I possess some similarities with participants in my research, I recognise that I come from a very different cultural background and that I am white and occupy a different sociocultural position from many participants in my research. This is important to recognise because my objectives to undertake research in this field are to highlight the detrimental consequences of adversity and to work towards developing strategies to address these concerns and to expand knowledge and awareness. As the methodological approaches I take demonstrate, I aim to assist women in amplifying the voices that have been silenced through structural and other limitations.

As the passion a researcher brings to their work is often clear, it is essential to acknowledge how this can influence a researcher's emotional state during every stage of the research conducted. For the projects I discuss in this chapter, I felt my emotional state was managed well and I did not cross the boundaries I set for myself. That does not however mean that I was not questioning whether I should have reacted differently in certain situations. For example, when speaking to women who have experienced trauma and might have experienced emotional 'episodes' during our chat, I found myself wanting to help, wanting to 'be there' for them, but I restrained myself from actualising that. Instead, I approached the issue carefully and sought to ensure I treated them as survivors, as women who have survived the violence, not women for whom I could or should establish an ongoing relationship of a personal nature. Physically I wanted to maintain boundaries and not react with a hug; instead, I offered tissues and reached out with my hand across the table but did not seek to touch. I believe this was enough of a gesture to indicate care.

In the previous section, I discussed the emotional safety of the participants and researchers as an ethical aspect, but it is very clear how this can be a challenging part of the research for the researcher. It was trying at times – wanting to do more, to say more, to show them more care – and many times I wondered whether I approached the situation properly. Appropriateness I believe was enhanced by the fact that I wanted to make sure I do justice to women's stories but also show them empathy – all in an ethical manner as a human and a researcher.

Speaking with staff who work with vulnerable women brings challenges in the emotional realm as well. For Project 2 the issue was around the location – a small, rural town in Australia. The stereotype – that this means 'everyone knows everyone' – is not far from the truth. Consequently, I felt at times uncomfortable when I came across my participants outside the fieldwork. This was mainly because I was struggling between my role as a researcher and as a community member. Still, I said 'hi', and had a chat if that is what the interaction dictated. As explained above, I emphasised to the participants that their participation in the interview would not have any consequences on our relationship. I was, however, questioning if the power dynamics might come into play from their perspective, or how they will view me – in what role. There was a lot of uncertainty, especially because I also wanted to make sure they could feel comfortable with my presence.

The above example shows that the emotional aspect of the research is not something that happens only during the fieldwork phase. Humans are emotional beings. We bring our emotions to the field and when we leave the field. This means that whatever we are experiencing in our lives, this will impact on how we operate during our fieldwork. We cannot be detached from our emotions, fully (nor should we), and we must be careful that 'we sometimes bring our home to our fieldwork, and our fieldwork back home'.

5 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

Fieldwork is a crucial method of research in the social sciences and involves collecting data directly from people in their natural settings. However, fieldwork can present several methodological challenges, especially when researching vulnerable populations, such as women experiencing homelessness due to DFV. As these women face multiple layers of marginalisation, they are a particularly vulnerable group. Consequently, whether the research involves women experiencing homelessness due to DFV as direct participants, or whether the research focuses on other issues surrounding these women, there are several personal and methodological issues that researchers face during fieldwork. In this section, I discuss how some of these challenges have shaped me as a researcher.

The conduct of the fieldwork can be reflective of how we work as researchers. The challenges and complexities in the field provide us with a unique opportunity to learn and grow as researchers. Reflecting on my work, the main lesson I learned was to be flexible. From my experience, flexibility is a key element in working with vulnerable groups.

During the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I had an opportunity to familiarise myself with the field I was researching. I learned quickly that the daily lives of these women were very complex and chaotic. Because of this, I learned that I needed to allow certain changes to occur during the research – mainly in the context of ethics and method. Many times, my scheduled interviews did not actually work out as planned and required a lot of improvisation and on-the-spot thinking. All the women who participated in my ethnographic fieldwork had ‘something going on’ in their lives, which was a pure demonstration of how chaotic the nature of people experiencing homelessness can be.

Due to the chaotic and transient nature of my participants’ lives, I felt my fieldwork became ‘transient’ as well. Meaning, I had to shift locations randomly and rapidly; I had to alter the times I undertook fieldwork; and I had to always be prepared for what might come next. For example, one participant agreed to the interview, she signed the informed consent, and we were ready to go. However, on the day, she came to the service where we were supposed to do the interview and asked if, instead of the interview, I could spend a day with her. She wanted to show me what her day looked like. For me, that was a unique and very precious opportunity. Thus, rather than sitting down for a lengthy interview, I spent the day with her. Once we left one of the services, we went to her temporary accommodation because she wanted to change. Then she took me around the corner to a bush, which was a ‘drop’ location for marijuana (as she explained), where she collected a bag. We continued to a local bottle shop, where she spent money on a cheap whiskey and generic cola. Then we continued to the park where we sat for approximately two hours. During this time, she talked to many people who walked by – some she knew, others she did not; and we had lengthy chats about her life.

I believe that being flexible allowed me to develop better relationships with my participants, and also to obtain better data. I did have to be mindful of how these relationships were developed and maintained. This was another lesson I learned: such as there are several ethical dilemmas. One dilemma is a blurred line between in the context of empathy and sensitivity (something I addressed earlier in this chapter). For me, it was a lesson learned as before I entered the field to research women experiencing homelessness due to DFV, I believed it would be easier to maintain clearer boundaries. However, for this type of research, I discovered that these lines can be very blurred, and as researchers, we need to recognise and acknowledge this.

In the more reflective part of my fieldwork, I always deliberate carefully where I stand in my personal beliefs and values – have these changed and what role do these play? I would like to think I always present my work in an objective manner, but the reality is different. When I enter the field, I do so with a specific aim. This aim is informed by my theoretical perspective, which guides how I approach my participants and what I ask them. This is where my emotions play a big part. When I talk to a woman who is sharing her life story with me – all the years of abuse, the hardship, the adversity, the challenges – I cannot entirely objectively engage with this. It influences how I present her story in my research. Hearing about the difficulties she faced, urges me to illuminate this, to ensure people read/hear about it.

When I talk to my participants, I tell them my desire to highlight their struggles. With this, I am already allowing my personal values to ‘interform’ my fieldwork (a portmanteau of ‘interfere’ and ‘inform’). I do not believe this is necessarily negative, but I do question whether I skew my data collection by being this transparent about my activism. In my opinion, this transparency allows me to form a relationship with my participants and potentially develop the trust that is essential when working with vulnerable participants.

In writing this chapter, delving into personal experiences of my fieldwork, and reflecting on my emotions, I started to question the value of trust. I emphasise the idea of trust when working with women experiencing homelessness due to DFV – as explained earlier, due to the distrust of authority, or other trust issues due to the experiences of trauma, trust is imperative in fieldwork. While in my fieldwork I seek always to act ethically and demonstrate my trustworthiness (especially by emphasising the importance of confidentiality and privacy), I wonder how much I trust – the process, my participants, and my analytical process. If I reflect on personal values and beliefs, do I trust myself that I am ‘correctly’ representing the stories I collected? I also wonder if I have the same trust in my participants that I ask of them to have for me?

With trust being so important for my participants, I recognise that this might be problematic for me. In my everyday life, I do not trust easily. However, I feel I am trustworthy. This is mainly because they share their difficult life stories with me; and I feel that if they do this for me, I can show them that I trust them.

When I started out as a researcher, I believed that collaborating with ‘gatekeepers’ would restrict access to my participants – as explained earlier, this was due to the literature indicating distrust in authorities for vulnerable groups. Thus, I believed that I would be better off, and develop better relationships if I avoid such access points. What I did not account for was the fact that many of these vulnerable women have developed trusting relationships with specific staff working at homelessness/DFV services. Whilst this cannot be generalised, it is a valid assumption and, in some circumstances, it proved valuable using gatekeepers to contact my participants.

Thinking about collaborations (or lack thereof), another valuable lesson I learned during my fieldwork in both settings is persistence and self-reliance. When fieldwork becomes challenging and issues arise, I had to motivate myself to persevere. Undertaking fieldwork on your own can be challenging, emotionally draining, and confronting. While I always had colleagues or work supervisors to debrief with, there are times when even a debrief would not be enough. This is not due to the matter of emotional safety, it is due to the mental exhaustion that comes with undertaking fieldwork with vulnerable participants, and when exploring sensitive topics.

I used to think ‘I can do a few interviews in a day – why not?’ Doing three or four, approximately one-hour long interviews would not be that demanding. But many times, an interview’s length is longer than expected; especially when participants feel they can finally speak freely about some of these sensitive issues; when somebody is listening and understanding what they are experiencing. Personally, I never wanted to interrupt my participant to stop sharing her story, and if we did not

go completely off the topic, I continued the interviews for as long as the participant desired. This is when the mental enervation begins. The topic is what tips the scale.

No matter what the challenges have been, or the ones that are yet to come, fieldwork is the best part of the research project. Being able to talk to someone about their unique experience, but also learning that there are many others who might be experiencing similar vulnerabilities and traumas and sharing this with participants – this is what makes it worth it.

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Chapter 8

Researching Party Zones: Drugs, Alcohol, and the Night



Tim Turner 

1 Introduction

In the alchemic explosion of electronic dance music and ecstasy in the late 1980s, the Balearic Island of Ibiza became the epicentre of a seismic shift in youth culture. In a few short years, the sleepy, Bohemian backwater was transformed into a spectacular global mecca for clubbing and hedonistic excess, with mass tourism bringing thousands of party-heads to the beaches and super-club dancefloors of ‘the White Isle’. As such, Ibiza represents a party zone extraordinaire, a magical realm where the routines and rules of everyday life are temporarily subverted, as thousands of summer tourists willingly embrace the pleasures and risks of atypical patterns of drug and alcohol use in a brief hiatus from reality (Turner & Measham, 2020).

The ethnographic research underpinning this chapter spanned three summers in Ibiza, across a range of tourist locations – from early morning, debris-strewn beaches, to faux-VIP pool parties, from the dizzying spectacle of 4 a.m. super-clubs to the hungover hangouts of laid-back suntraps. Field notes from participant observation were supplemented with data from semi-structured interviews ($N = 56$). The key theoretical concept emerging from the research is *the Disneyization of drug use*. This has been outlined in depth elsewhere (see Turner, 2018, 2023), in short, I argue how the same marketing techniques that generate *legal* hyper-consumption within Disney’s theme parks, also drive the near-industrial levels of *illegal* drug use evident in Ibiza. This chapter, however, moves attention away from the *Disneyization* framework. Firstly, I will outline some of the complex methodological processes of researching nightlife party zones, and secondly, I will trace the *emotional journey* of the Ibiza experience. This is done through the eyes of participants, and by reflecting on my own time as a researcher immersed in a wild party zone that was (often

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simultaneously) spectacular, chaotic, overwhelming, exhausting, exhilarating, risky, and hilarious. This is important as emotional aspects of research are often overlooked (Briggs, 2013; Farkic, 2021), while drug research has long focused on narratives of risk and harm, rather than the affective experiences of those involved (Turner, 2018).

The chapter is organised into five key sections, commencing with an overview of the complex methodological challenges of undertaking ethnographic research in unpredictable party zones. The remaining four sections reflect the delineated phases of travel within tourism literature (Taylor & Norman, 2019) and *the* emotional arc of the Ibiza experience. The first section focuses on *anticipation* of the journey, as people gradually abandon the parameters of home life. Secondly, I outline the sense of *ambivalence* that rapidly distorts patterns of intoxication on arrival in Ibiza, as a temporary ‘new normal’ is established. In the third section, I describe the *atmospheric exhilaration* of drug use witnessed in the spectacular events staged on the island. In the final part of this emotional journey, the comedown crash of *apprehension* is explored, as the Ibiza experience draws to a close, and the inevitable return to the realities of home approaches.

2 Methodology Matters: Doing Ethnography in Party Zones

The aim of this research was to explore the psychosocial and cultural meaning of drug and alcohol use in the party zones of Ibiza, from the perspective of those involved. The study was rooted in cultural criminology, a theoretical, methodological, and interventionist approach to the study of crime and deviance (Ferrell et al., 2015; Hayward, 2008). This section outlines some of the methodological processes involved in Ibiza and offers insight into some of the challenges of doing ethnographic research in wild nightlife spaces.

2.1 *Finding Ways in: Trust and Acceptance in Party Zones*

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a host of tourist-focused locations. These included airports in the UK and in Ibiza, busy tourist beaches, a variety of hotels and pool areas, cafes, restaurants, bars, and the infamous super-clubs of Ibiza’s night-time economy – globally branded, large-capacity venues such as *Amnesia*, *Pacha*, and *Privilege*. The gatekeeper – a friend who owned an events company linked to Electronic Dance Music – proved to be an essential link during fieldwork, gaining us access to super-club guest lists that would otherwise have been off-limits with ticket prices around 80–100 euros. As fieldwork unfolded, we felt increasingly close to the band of British workers employed in various roles across the night-time economy. Acceptance within this group was organic and gave us almost instant credibility with some of the people we met.

Caught in an afternoon storm, we sit outside a bar under the cover of a canopy. We chat to a group of three male, British bar workers sat drinking at the next table. After an hour of good-humoured conversation, we tell them about the research. They've already heard about us – “ah *you're* the ‘researchers’ [in finger quote marks, laughing], you need to fucking interview us!” (Field notes)

This kind of reaction to the research was common. People often seemed bemused and delighted that we had somehow ‘duped’ the system and were being paid to go on ‘holiday’. Playing along with this teasing helped us to gain acceptance among participants, as this scene in a late-night bar demonstrates.

I meet Ben in a West End bar at 3a.m. Him and a couple of friends come over and start calling me ‘Eyeball Paul’ (DJ character in the film *Kevin and Perry Go Large*). I play along with the joke, and we chat amiably for the next few hours as they pass a pouch of ketamine between them. We leave there at 6a.m., swap numbers and they agree to meet later that day for an interview. (Field notes)

Being close-up to drug use was an inevitable feature of the research, but I never felt pressured to participate. At times, participants understandably sought reassurance when discussing their involvement in taking and dealing with illicit drugs. Journalists have long churned out stories of rampaging British youth in European beach resorts, so participants often displayed a guarded scepticism until they trusted our identities and motives. It was not unusual for people to assume we were working undercover, either as cops or journalists. As the excerpt below shows, gaining trust took time and was subject to rapid shifts.

After a long night working the bar, Sam sits with me in a café and tells me stories of his time on the island. Then, from nowhere, he pauses mid-sentence, head in hands – “You are *really* a researcher, aren't you? Promise me you're not a journalist”. I reassure him and he regains composure, explaining how a tabloid hack duped him last summer, splashing his photo across a British newspaper. (Field notes)

Ethnographic Immersion required a deeper level of access that went beyond observation. The field note below reflects this and shows how immersion, while fraught with ethical dilemmas, reveals the kind of ‘dirty knowledge’ that Ferrell (1997) asserts is necessary to enhance criminological understanding.

Our guides for the night lead us to a busy bar and shout orders to the waitress. Jugs of some lurid cocktail are dropped on the table. Sean, the same man who had earlier insisted that he had “no interest in drugs”, has been dabbing at a pouch of MDMA throughout the night and offers it liberally to anyone in his vicinity. Time accelerates and night descends into blurred disorientation. Eventually, the group tips out of the bar into the stark daylight of 6a.m. and everyone heads for breakfast. (Field notes)

2.2 From Observation to Participation

Fieldwork engaged three forms of observation. While these have been separated here for the purposes of clarity – in reality, observation is dynamic and needs to be responsive to the setting as events unfold. Firstly, periods of *unobtrusive*

observation happened over the 24-hour period. This involved choosing an interesting setting and observing events there over several hours. The locations were busy public spaces, making it easy to merge into the environment and avoid attracting attention. I used the notes application on a mobile phone to record observations, thoughts, and emotions, with the aim to capture a snapshot of the context.

Secondly, *marginal participation* required a certain level of engagement with participants. This often involved drinking alcohol in limited amounts to fit in with the surroundings and those present. If you are with a group of eight drunk men at a stag party and they offer you a drink, ordering a Diet Coke is unlikely to oil the wheels of acceptance. Thirdly, having gained trust and acceptance, numerous participants invited me to go out with them for the whole night. This required a deeper level of participation, but as Trigger et al. (2012, p. 525) state, 'The more the researcher engages personally with people, the more likely that intensely experienced revelatory moments will arise'. Participant observation did, of course, bring complex ethical challenges, especially as it inevitably meant observing relatively open use of illicit drugs, as well as dealing.

2.3 *Doing Interviews*

The study involved 33 semi-structured interviews with individuals and small focus groups. These varied in duration from 30 to 120 minutes. Interviewees ($n = 56$) consisted of 42 tourists (21 males and 21 females), a Spanish police officer, and 13 seasonal workers (eight males and five females) aged between 18 and 35 years. The workers were employed in a range of roles associated with Ibiza's night-time economy, these included bar staff, ticket sellers, dancers, door security, and public relations (PR) staff. Interviews were structured around questions that could easily be adapted and changed to fit the natural flow of the conversation. Asking intrusive questions about illegal drugs just a few minutes after meeting someone is not easy. Ethnographers need the skill to read the dynamics of the situation and instinctively know when it feels okay to ask these difficult questions – and when they are best avoided. Where possible, I recorded interviews in a quiet setting using an audio application on a password-protected mobile. I also made notes of thoughts, feelings, or ideas about the meeting.

2.4 *Taking Photographs*

Over the course of the research, I took a total of 580 digital photographs. This was an unobtrusive form of data collection, as photography is hardly unusual in a tourist setting. The images added visual depth to the study and helped capture Ibiza's identity and sense of place, two entwined concepts that can generate an understanding of the social world (Spencer, 2011).

2.5 *The Ethics of Researching Party Zones*

Ethical approval for the research was granted by Coventry University, UK. This included important considerations for consent. Bryman (2012) identifies three principal considerations in this respect: knowledge and understanding of what is involved, competence to give consent, and voluntary choice. There are complex ethical challenges in relation to researching drug and alcohol use in nightlife settings. In this study, I began by using a simple participant information sheet that outlined the research aims, as well as the limits of anonymity and confidentiality. However, it quickly became apparent that asking people for written consent felt overly formal in settings that were the epitome of informal (is there anywhere less formal than a beach?). The form felt like a barrier to the conversation, so I switched to taking verbal consent for the audio-recorded interviews. Participants' intoxication through alcohol and/or drug use is a significant challenge for ethnographic research in party zones. Interviews and observations took place throughout the 24-hour period, making it inevitable that participants were intoxicated to varying degrees. People in extreme states of intoxication were not interviewed. I quickly learned that the ideal window for interviews was between 11:00 and 18:00. Any earlier and people were still asleep, and any later, some were more likely to be too intoxicated. Observations were undertaken in busy public locations, making it impossible to gain consent from everyone present (Gobo, 2008, p. 140). Such observations were stripped of information that might inadvertently reveal the identity of those present.

Fieldwork in the night-time economy is often unpredictable. As Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2015, p. 212) state, 'Ethnographic studies generally mix hours of tedium with explosions of surprise and moments of dangerous uncertainty'. An example of the volatile nature of drug research is outlined in the excerpt below, relating to a chance meeting with a female worker whom I had interviewed a few days earlier.

Ella enthusiastically introduces me to Andy, her "fiancé" – a term that strikes me as entirely out-of-place in this context – it seems old-fashioned, and this man is wired on pills and wearing luminous yellow gloves. As Ella goes to the bar, Andy leans into me threateningly: "this research thing, if you fuck me over, I will fuck you up. I will FUCK. YOU. UP." He's wide-eyed and jabbing a yellow finger in my chest. I try and reassure him, but he's deeply suspicious. I offer him a drink and suggest we sit outside on the terrace. After ten minutes, we're laughing and joking and he's insistent that I come to his villa for dinner. (Field notes)

Moments like these punctuate nightlife fieldwork, when interviews are focused on illegal drug taking, people are understandably wary, making it important to carry an identity card. On several occasions, this also provided proof of my role as a researcher to curious police officers. In addition to my own safety, I also felt responsible for protecting participants from harm. The unpredictable and anarchic nature of fieldwork in Ibiza was often a challenging balance between observing and intervening. Take the incident outlined below, situated outside a club in the early hours.

A young woman is sitting on the floor, clearly very unwell. Her eyes are closed, and her head hangs limply, flopping from side-to-side. Her panic-stricken friend shakes her by the

shoulders. I kneel, and her tearful friend tells me they've taken *gold leaf* pills [a brand of ecstasy]. I try and get some water into her, but it just dribbles from her mouth. She needs medical assistance, but the friend argues against this, fearful of reprisals. I make the decision for her, and two paramedics arrive within minutes. (Field notes)

While this intervention oversteps the line of observation, researchers have a moral obligation to act if someone is at an immediate risk of harm. This is an issue that requires careful consideration before starting fieldwork. At what point, and in what situations, might you need to intervene as an ethnographic observer?

Confidentiality and anonymity are important ethical considerations in drug research (Aldridge et al., 2011, p. 35). Pseudonyms were used at the time of interview, and demographic details were omitted. Participants frequently described how being away from home gave them a welcome sense of anonymity. This somehow made it easier to discuss sensitive topics and I found participants remarkably candid about their drug use. However, it was important that people understood the limits of confidentiality. They were informed that confidentiality could not be maintained if they made disclosures of criminal offences involving serious harm to others, such as violent assaults, for example.

3 Emotions

Having outlined some of the complex methodological challenges of doing ethnography in the chaotic milieu of party zones, this section focuses on the emotional arc of the Ibiza experience, both from my own perspective as a researcher and through the voices of participants.

3.1 *Anticipation: Great Expectations*

The airport departure lounge is heaving, with queues outside the main eateries and bars. I look around and try to second-guess my fellow-Ibiza travellers. I manage to find a lone empty bar stool in Wetherspoons. There's an increasingly raucous stag party firmly installed on a table in the corner, nine lads with matching t-shirts splashed with the slogan '*What happens in Ibiza, Stays in Ibiza*' and the 'tour dates' on the back. They've got a table heaving with Stella Artois and judging by the empties, they've been here a while. Metaphorically, their heads are clearly already on the beach. I can identify with that, it's my fourth time on the island and I'm excited for what's ahead. (Field notes)

Countless fairy tales, folklore, and contemporary films are defined by the hero's journey, where the protagonist leaves the safety of home for perilous adventures in faraway, secondary worlds – defined by Campbell (2008, p. 48) as 'places of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight' – a metaphor that perfectly describes the magical, multi-day escapes of nightlife tourist resorts like Ibiza, where opportunities for

transgressive leisure stand in juxtaposition to the mundane routines of the everyday (Turner & Measham, 2020). As Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011) assert, tourism is often less about the encounter of a site, than the tourist's experience of their own expectations. For many young people, *anticipation* of the Ibiza experience is savoured as a date in the diary where the worries of normal life will be put aside, in an alternate reality characterised by experimentation and excess.

We save for this all year. We count down the days. It's a week where we don't have to think about anything apart from getting fucked up and having a laugh. (Harry, tourist)

All year, you get up, go to work, come home. It's fucking boring, man. This is my ten days to get lost. It's what keeps me going for the rest of the year. (Rob, tourist)

This is an escape. You can act differently here, no one knows who you are. (Alex, tourist)

For many travelling to these alternate worlds, the liminal travel hub of the airport represents an important in-between space – a threshold where the traveller begins the transition from 'the veil of the known into the unknown' (Campbell, 2008, p. 67). The liminal traveller is 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between', out-of-time and out-of-place. In bustling international airports, social conventions begin to fall away, and the structure and order are replaced with a deep sense of anticipation for the alluring possibilities that await in the otherworld. In such spaces, tourists may seek the adventures of 'incidental engagements, which puncture the otherwise mundane predictability of everyday life' (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006, p. 762). In this sense, the airport represents a symbolic threshold, where captive consumers are bombarded by adverts evoking dreams of travel. And among the hyper-commerciality of duty-free shopping malls, theme pubs and cocktail lounges offer the novel experience of a 7 a.m. bar, for a legal prelude to the (illegal) excesses ahead.

We were drinking Stella at the airport for three hours, then we thought we might as well warm up properly for the holiday, so we ordered three bottles of Champagne. (Mark, tourist)

There were some lads on the plane who were *really* drunk. They kept falling over and stuff. They got told off by the aircrew. (Pacha, female tourist)

I was slaughtered at the airport. (Jed, tourist)

We only got here at 2a.m. last night. We had to carry him off the plane cos he was so drunk [points at a friend, who has taken ecstasy and is laughing while digging at the sand with both hands]. We had to put him to bed, and then me and my other mate went out. (George, tourist, Bora Bora beach)

The airport is an inherently ambiguous space that splices notions of freedom with hyper-securitisation and surveillance. A gauntlet of security staff, metal detectors, body scans, bag searches, and even drug detection dogs stand in the way of the tourist's entry to the 'impossible delights' of Ibiza. Despite these multiple levels of security, some participants were undeterred from incorporating illegal drug use into the anticipatory threshold experience of the airport, as they step into a 'temporary sphere' of behaviour (Shaw & Williams, 2004, p. 151).

We did pills at the airport before we went through security. Fucking ridiculous. (Zac, tourist)

Have you ever come up [peak of ecstasy experience] on a plane? I wouldn't recommend it. (Ben, tourist)

For tourists like Ben and Zac, passing through the last stage of airport security feels like a final metaphorical gateway to be breached, granting access to the hallowed flight. This was succinctly illustrated in an exchange with Dominika, a member of the cabin crew on a flight from UK to Ibiza:

Tim (author/interviewer): Do you always work on the Ibiza route?

Dominika (cabin crew): No, but this is my favourite as the flight is always fun [smiles].

Tim (author/interviewer): What's so fun about it?

Dominika (cabin crew): Everyone is happy and wants to party.

This section has shown how *anticipation*, a key phase of tourism, represents the preliminary emotional dimension of the Ibiza experience. This starts from the moment that the holiday is booked, and peaks in the liminal threshold of the airport. For nightlife tourists, this point of separation from the realities of the home is often infused with intoxication and represents 'the pause before [they] move on to the next stopping point along the extraordinary route ways of liquid modernity' (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 29).

3.2 *Arrival and Ambivalence*

Stepping into the party zones of Ibiza, it's difficult to convey the overwhelming sense of *emotional ambivalence* towards illicit drugs that seem to engulf those present. For many of the tourists and seasonal workers I met, drugs were a frequent preoccupation and a routine part of casual conversation. Over the period of fieldwork, I was there when drugs were taken, swapped, shared, and sold with barely any attention to the inhibitive factors that usually restrict or conceal such behaviour in the 'real world'. Elsewhere, I have described this as a form of *Disneyized* hybrid consumption (Turner, 2018, 2023), a process where disparate *legal* consumer products are seamlessly woven together within the same space, so that established differences become indistinct (Bryman, 2004). In the party zones of Ibiza, this blurs the line between legal and illegal forms of intoxication to such an extent that it has effectively collapsed, rapidly transforming regular patterns of drug use. As the excerpts below show, this creates an overwhelming sense of emotional *ambivalence*.

Drugs are just accepted here, simple as that. It's not the same as home, people just don't worry about it here. (Nick, bar worker/drug dealer)

A lot of people will come out here and say, 'This is the first time I've ever taken a pill'. I met this couple here on holiday last week, they were so strait-laced at home, and here they'd been doing pills for the first time. It's just seen as acceptable out here. It's just the done thing. (Karen, PR Manager)

I've been offered pills about 40 times. Even sitting around here [by the hotel pool] you'll get people coming and asking if you want anything. One of the mates I'm with is clean living at home, goes down the gym and all that. He took three pills yesterday afternoon, just sat by the pool. (Rob, tourist)

On reflecting on the emotional aspects of ethnographic immersion in these party spaces, it's clear from reviewing field notes that, in symmetry with participants, my own sense of ambivalence developed over the course of the research:

I sit outside a heaving West End bar, at a rickety wooden table with benches. It's just after 1 a.m. and still warm. The narrow street is packed and chaotic. Two lads sit down on the same table, dip moistened fingers into a small pouch of white powder, rub it rapidly into exposed gums, and leave without a word. A few minutes later, a wired-looking Scottish teenager sits down. He nudges my shoulder and asks if I've got any pills to sell. In the West End it hardly registers. (Field notes)

It's 6 a.m. and after a long night, I sit having breakfast with Nick (bar worker/drug dealer) in a local café popular with British workers. As we chat idly over mugs of tea, Nick takes a plastic pouch of ketamine from his wallet, dips a key into it, and openly snorts the white powder cleanly from the metal. In my third week on the island, over breakfast in a bustling café, this feels entirely normal. (Field notes)

This exemplifies the strengths of ethnography as a method for studying drug use. What other method would capture the nonchalant ambivalence of these transgressive moments? The singer Noel Gallagher once infamously stated that taking drugs was no different to 'having a cup of tea in the morning'. It's easy to see that in the context of Ibiza, this is the same for Nick, drugs are an unremarkable part of breakfast. And for me as an immersed researcher, after another long night out, I barely notice. This is similarly reflected in the following excerpts, which show the emotional ambivalence that is created as the line separating legal and illegal substances becomes indistinguishable.

Mid-afternoon and I stop off at a San Antonio bar to get out of the sun for a drink. It's a quiet side street and I'm the only customer. The Spanish bar man is in his 60s and seems happy to talk, as it's so quiet. As I finish my drink, he asks if I want another, and almost as an afterthought asks if I want to buy some 'very good MDMA'. We've only been chatting for 15 minutes. (Field notes)

In multi-day party zones like Ibiza, this ambivalence has important connotations for potential harm. Individual interpretations of risk are not shaped in a cultural vacuum, they are grounded within the social milieu (Kelly, 2005, p. 1444). Fieldwork showed how, for some young people, regular patterns of drug and alcohol use are rapidly transformed. This distortion of risk is not founded on a lack of awareness about the potential harms of taking more drugs than usual, or trying drugs for the first time, but rather an ambivalent perception that they are unlikely to be harmed on holiday in *Wonderland*.

A woman in her 20s collapses on the floor, and in that moment the spell of the club is broken. She looks terrible. Her eyes have rolled back, and her mouth hangs limply open. Those in the vicinity look shocked as two, visibly shaken male friends grasp her under the shoulders and drag her limp body off the dancefloor. As she disappears into the crowd, the group around me shake off their concern, turn to face the DJ and start dancing again. Out of sight and out of mind, the bubble is restored. (Field notes)

I mean we read the paper about the lass dying [in a super-club], and not one person flinched. Not one of the group said, 'oh I'm not going to have a pill tonight'. Then the group next to us started talking about it and they said the exact same thing. (Ben, tourist)

Importantly, this ambivalence seeps into decisions about dealing drugs. Many seasonal workers involved in this research were deeply immersed in the illegal drug economy, something they consistently stated they would never consider at home in the 'real world'. This was at least partially facilitated by a pervasive ambivalence to drugs by police and those working in club security.

Every other person here is a drug dealer. It starts off every other person is a ticket seller, and then after about three or four weeks, every other person is a drug dealer. It's an easy way to make money. You take 10, 15, 20 pills out in your pocket. You make between 200 and 300 euros straight up. (Ella, ticket seller)

A lot of people come out here to work and don't anticipate how hard it is. There are so many ticket sellers around and most are on commission only. When they can't pay the rent, they just start dealing, because it's easy and no one really cares. (Karen, PR Manager)

My friends here haven't got jobs. They just make money from selling drugs. (Kazza, bar worker)

Up to 30 or 40 [ecstasy] pills here [shrugs shoulders with ambivalence], we take them to the police station and just fill in the forms. They get a fine. It's not a big problem. [Smiling] On the mainland, it's different. There, maybe five is a problem. (Spanish Police Officer, San Antonio)

I never even bother hiding it [from door security]. I just hold it in my hands. The first night we went out. One of the bouncers caught us doing ket [starts laughing]. He takes the bag off me and just empties it over my head. (Jed, tourist)

Yeah, I saw someone dealing in a club I was working last week. He looked at me and I said, 'mate, don't be a dick, if you're gonna do that, go in the fucking crowd where I can't see you. Don't stand next to the fucking toilet in the middle of everywhere. If I see you doing it again, I'll take all your money and drugs off you. (Christopher, bouncer)

Ambivalence is a key emotional aspect of the Ibiza experience. This is important, as it appears to be a crucial affective component of the process by which illegal drugs become rapidly normalised within the physical and temporal boundaries of the island's party zones.

3.3 *Atmospheric Exhilaration*

A mishmash of music pumps out from various sources; there's a real festival spirit here. Promo girls in 6-inch heels and bikinis work the middle of the road for the bar across the street, with groups of men leering behind them. We move to the bar, and I order four wine glasses and a jug of sangria. The bar is pristine white and stands above a rocky coastline. The terrace is full of 'beautiful' people dressed up, eating, drinking, and flirting. Below the terrace, a terrain of rocks is littered with party-people stretching 500 yards up the coastline. Couples and groups clamber around the rocks with all manner of take-out booze. Strangers offer wide-eyed friendly nods, smiles, and words. Our guides for the night sit high on the wooden steps that descend to the beach. They overlook the throng like a couple of Ibiza

gurus; they've surveyed this same scene for a month. I find a spot where I can watch the sunset. The PA is kicking out Pavarotti's *Nessun Dorma* as we stand within a few feet of one another and watch a burnt orange sun sink into the ocean. (Field notes)

The magical staged experiences of Ibiza's nightlife generate deeply immersive atmospheres that are greater than the sum of the parts. While difficult to define, the atmosphere in Ibiza frequently felt *exhilarating* – it felt tangible as it saturated the space in ways that were affectively and sensually overwhelming, enveloping, and connecting those present (see for example, Anderson, 2009; Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015; Shaw, 2013). In deconstructing this *atmospheric exhilaration*, the alchemic synergy of light, sound, sociality, and the powerful psychoactive effects of ecstasy, cocaine, and ketamine represent crucial features of the immersive assemblage.

Light is a sensorial component of urban space that can envelop and subtly influence our patterns of sociality (Atkinson, 2007, p. 1907). The way in which cities are transformed by sundown has been widely explored within the spheres of criminology and geography, but more recent scholarship has explored the emotional, atmospheric dimensions of the city at night (Shaw, 2013). In Ibiza, darkness is a powerful component of the atmosphere. As the excerpt below shows, the synergy of darkness and intoxication is welcomed as a transformative, exhilarating experience

Drug use is barely concealed among the three hundred-strong crowd gathered on the rocks at dusk. I've been offered pills half a dozen times in the last couple of hours. As the sun disappears into an oceanic horizon, the decibels are ramped up by the DJ, and the loved-up gathering spontaneously erupts into raucous cheers and applause. It feels like we're celebrating the symbolic arrival of the night. (Field notes)

Sound also exerts a powerful influence on the emotional experience of the atmosphere and can shape patterns of social interaction and experimentation (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015, p. 253). In the party zones of Ibiza, the spectrum of electronic dance music (EDM) defines both the meaning and the boundaries of space – here, sound promotes culture, lifestyle, and [drug] consumption (Hayward, 2012). This immersive symbiosis of sound and drugs featured consistently in participant narratives and was a key aspect of the *exhilaration*.

I took the best pill I've ever taken in my life in there [superclub]. The music was amazing. I had about two hours just next to the bass bins with my eyes closed. (Jack, bar worker)

We did gold leaf [ecstasy]. It was so intense, so good, like dancing inside some claustrophobic sweatbox. I felt the bass through every part of my body, like it had passed through every one of us in the club. It connected us, like we were inside the music. (Maria, tourist)

I wandered through the different rooms in the club, and it was just like I was floating. I put my hand up for people to touch as they passed me. Everyone's just smiling at each other, everyone. Then I walk into this room and Primal Scream came on. I've never felt so happy. I just started dancing on my own – but not on my own – like the whole crowd is with me. (Carla, tourist)

These excerpts convey the sheer exhilaration of the atmosphere. In their accounts, participants reflexively deconstruct the assemblage of the super-club and show how each component – light, sound, sociality, drugs – magically converges to create a deeply emotional experience. There were moments in fieldwork where I witnessed

the emotional fragility of the atmosphere, which at any moment could fracture, through dramatic, or out-of-place events.

The carnival atmosphere of the West End is all encompassing, but vulnerable to very sudden shifts. An ambulance desperately trying to push through the crowd or a chaotic street fight spilling from a bar, can momentarily fracture the spell. Tonight, it's the flash of casual violence from the much feared, militaristic *Guardia Civil* that pops the bubble. Four green uniforms rain blows and kicks on some drunk teenager before they cuff him. People stop, stare, and then turn away as the drama concludes. (Field notes)

The temporal, fragile nature of atmospheric exhilaration was also conveyed in participants' interviews. There was a conscious awareness that they were experiencing a fleeting moment in hyper-reality, a time-limited, exhilarating bubble.

I couldn't live like this. On the fourth day, I woke up and thought, 'I won't be doing any more drugs this holiday'. Then my mate said, 'it's once a year, just get on it', so I did. We'll stop when we get home. (Ben, tourist)

You still feel like you're on drugs the next day. I mean for ten days, fair enough, but I couldn't do it longer than that. (Zac, tourist)

This section has focused on the atmospheric exhilaration felt within the hyper-real, magical worlds staged within Ibiza's infamous party zones. This is created through an alchemic assemblage of light, sound, connection to others, and the transformative, psychoactive effects of drugs that are infused into the experience. In the following section, the emphasis shifts to the emotions felt as this brief, otherworldly experience draws to a close and reintegration into the realities of home-life approach.

3.4 *Apprehension and Reintegration*

It's so different from home. None of us want to leave. (Sarah, tourist)

Dominika (cabin crew): coming back, they're all different, like this [makes a sad face]. Everyone is tired and fed up because they're going home.

In the fairy tale monomyth, as the hero completes their transcendental journey, they must return home from the wonders of the secondary world and face life back in reality with all its 'banalities and noisy obscenities' (Campbell, 2008, p. 189). A palpable sense of *apprehension* about returning to the routines of home, after the hedonistic freedom of Ibiza, was frequently expressed by participants.

I love it here. I don't want to leave. It's not real though. (Bianca, tourist, Ibiza)

I don't know how much I've spent. I haven't checked my balance once, and I've been waving my credit card around all week. The consequences are gonna kick me in the face when I get home ... financial consequences, health consequences. (Paul, tourist)

I'm so fucking tired. I haven't slept properly for a week. I'm dreading getting home because I know I'll be crashing, and I've got a really shitty week at work. (Rob, tourist)

We touch down at Birmingham airport in driving rain at 4a.m. It's dark and miserable as we step onto the tarmac. I feel suddenly stupid and out-of-place in shorts. The crushing banal-

ity of reality surrounds us as we pass through the administrative hoops of airport security. We emerge onto the airport concourse and a single coffee shop is open, which feels bizarre in comparison to the 24/7 culture we've just left. I think, probably for the first time in a week, about finances, work, and all the other joys of real life. A silent cab journey drops us to Brina's place at 05:30a.m. Only a week has passed since I parked my car there, but it feels like a month. As I drive home, I pass rows of modest semi-detached houses, with curtains drawn and manicured lawns. It feels strange that everyone's asleep at 06.00 in the morning, and my mind drifts to the madness that must be happening in the West End. (Field notes, 'reality re-entry')

Once home, the gradual transition back into the rhythms of everyday life was characterised by a brief but powerful period of liminality, a readjustment to normality where time in the hyper-reality of Ibiza overlapped and seeped into normal life.

When I got home, things were bad for a few days. I kept waking up in the middle of the night, I was convinced that the demon from 'Insidious' [a horror film] was in the room – *absolutely convinced*. And that was for three or four days. I couldn't shake it. (Alex, tourist)

I swear I could still hear the music when I got home, I'd be in that weird state of half-sleep, and I could hear the distant thud of techno. I'd wake up and be really confused, thinking I was still there. (Maria, tourist)

I've been back home for three days now and caught up with sleep. Only now am I starting to feel back to 'normal'. For the first couple of days, I felt drained and disorientated. I keep thinking back to everything we saw and experienced in Ibiza, and somehow it just doesn't feel real. (Tim Turner, field notes)

Gradually, this sense of liminality and apprehension dissipated with reintegration into home life, and participants reflected on the importance of the stories distilled from their experience in Ibiza. These cherished memories are the currency of the late modern experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), conveying kudos, identity, and social bonds with those on the same journey.

It's about the experience and the journey. It's a story to share with my friends – like, 'listen to what happened to me' – it's about getting away from boring, mundane life. You can be someone else for a while. (Christopher, bouncer, Ibiza)

We've had *the best time* here, so many memories to take home. (George, tourist)

In this respect, Ibiza and other multi-day, hedonistic spaces like festivals represent experiential spaces where contemporary consumers return home with stories of the wild. These stories of youthful transgression, reshaped and mythologised over a lifetime, help cement friendship ties between those involved (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013) and resonate with notions of 'a life lived'.

It's about the experience and the journey. It's a story to share with my friends – like, 'listen to what happened to me' – it's about getting away from boring, mundane life. You can be someone else for a while. (Christopher, bouncer, Ibiza)

It's all we come to do; we hope to come back with stories to tell. Good stories. It's like we come out here to be able to say, 'do you remember that moment we shared?' I think it builds relationships. I've got a huge cork board, like a half wall, dedicated to times on the island. Little mementoes, ticket stubs, stuff like that. I can pick out moments to draw back on to remember that time. (Alex, tourist)

The question is, does this transgressive hiatus in the hyper-reality of nightlife resorts have any lasting impact on the attitudes, values, and behaviours of those involved? Apart from ticket stubs, photos, and stories of where the wild things are, what else do we bring back from these experiences? Perhaps there are also powerful aspects of self-discovery that are wrapped up in our journeys to these secondary worlds.

I think the place really opened my eyes. Big time. I'd experienced lots of things at home, but going there for the first time, it changed me. My eyes were well and truly opened. (Ben, tourist)

4 Conclusion

This chapter has placed a spotlight on the methodological processes of undertaking ethnographic research within the wild party zones of Ibiza. Hopefully, this has demonstrated that while the ethical issues of such research are undoubtedly complex, the rewards of ethnographic immersion are worth it for the insights that are generated from such proximity to participant narratives. For any social researchers setting out to study party zones, I offer guidance in the form of three *dos and don'ts*. *Do* prioritise the voice of your participants, and continually reflect on whether you are accurately representing the experiences, thoughts, and attitudes of the people you are researching. *Do* use a mobile phone app for making field notes in situ, it's much less overt than a pen and paper, and you won't *look* like a researcher. *Do* take photographs to add a visual element to your field notes. As the saying goes, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. *Don't* be afraid to ask difficult, intrusive questions. Once rapport is established, you'll be surprised how open people are. *Don't* be overly formal or 'academic' in your demeanour. Be human, it's a conversation. *Don't* avoid highlighting narratives of pleasure in drug research, it is your job to reflect balance and the realities of intoxication from the perspectives of those involved.

In addition to matters of methodology, the chapter has also outlined the affective aspects of doing ethnography inside an infamously wild party zone, from the perspective of those involved, and reflexively as an immersed researcher. In tracing the visceral arc of the mythologised 'Ibiza experience', this research contributes to a criminological evidence base that has often minimised or completely overlooked emotion, in a preoccupation with the obscure equations of abstract empiricism (Young, 2011, p. 223). In comparison, ethnography can capture the oceanic euphoria and claustrophobic intensity of the super-club dancefloor; it can catch the non-chalant ambivalence of a summer-time drug dealer with a pocketful of pills.

The narratives highlighted in the chapter show how nightlife resorts and similar multi-day party zones, such as music festivals, represent theatrical stages to play out temporal forms of deviant leisure. The exhilarating pleasures of intoxication that have been documented here counter an ideology within orthodox criminology that stubbornly negates the role of pleasure and focuses on the 'miserable' and the

‘negative’ in a narrative that strips out the energy and spirit of human experience (Young, 2011, pp. 186–187). Nevertheless, it is essential not to obfuscate the potential harms that lurk beneath the surface of the atypical drug and alcohol use that percolate through multi-day party zones. In this respect, nightlife resorts like Ibiza represent ideal settings to engage young tourists in non-judgemental discussions about drug and alcohol use. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to improve medical and welfare services in these resorts, alongside the kind of progressive drug-checking service that has been pioneered by *The Loop* (see Measham, 2019) within UK festivals, clubs, and city centres. It is crucial harm reduction measures like these that will help ensure young people return from the wild zone only with wide-eyed stories of connection and exhilaration.

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Chapter 9

Conducting Criminological Practitioner Research with Sex Workers in Switzerland



Lorena Molnar 

1 Sex Work: Definitions, Delimitations, and State of the Art

Criminological research on sex work is not a hot topic, but it is not scarce either, even though most studies have been conducted in countries that forbid this activity. In this chapter, I address the methodological and ethical aspects of criminological research on sex workers that my colleagues and I conducted in Switzerland, a country where sex work is a legal activity. Through the sharing of my own research experience, inspired naturally by past studies, I develop a reflection about conducting criminological research when wearing two “hats”: one as a social worker and the other as a researcher.

1.1 Sex Work in Switzerland

It is imperative to define what we mean by *sex work* as this is a varied phenomenon (Azhar et al., 2020; Harcourt & Donovan, 2005) that includes many sexual practices under remuneration in a diverse context. Sex work, also called *prostitution* in the past, has been regarded differently depending on the epoch and culture (for a review, see Jenkins, 2020). Currently, its regulation or criminalization depends on each country (Danna, 2014; Jahnsen, 2019). For instance, in countries such as Romania or Croatia, prostitution is a misdemeanor, while in the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland, it is a freelance economic activity. Other countries, such as France and Sweden, criminalize customers of prostitution but not the sex workers per se, who are considered as victims of the society. Moreover, it is important to note that sex

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workers are a heterogeneous “group” composed of persons of highly different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and therefore, making generalizations should be avoided if heterogeneous samples are not sufficient (Shaver, 2005).

Switzerland is a federal country that is composed of smaller administrative units, the cantons, which possess a great autonomy in ruling themselves. Areas such as the management of prisons, police, and justice are canton-dependent, for instance. The same is true for sex work. Specifically, the Canton of Vaud, situated in Western Switzerland, where my research was conducted, considers sex work as “the activity of a person who habitually engages in sexual acts or acts of a sexual nature, with a fixed or undetermined number of clients, for remuneration” (art. 1, LOI 943.05 sur l’exercice de la prostitution [LPros], 2004). Street sex work is permitted only in a specific area in Lausanne, the capital of the canton (Ville de Lausanne, 2016). At night, sex work through street soliciting is permitted from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m. Sex workers are therefore allowed to solicit their customers in the street, but the sexual service must be conducted elsewhere.

On the other hand, indoor sex work is permitted in the whole canton in premises that have obtained an administrative license for erotic tariffed activities. These are named by the law as “erotic massage salons” (LOI 943.05 sur l’exercice de la prostitution [LPros], 2004; Ville de Lausanne, 2016) and can be an apartment, which is the most prevalent type of erotic massage salon, but also bars or clubs with private rooms. In the latter, the sex workers gather in the main bar area and initiate interactions with customers of the bar. If the sex workers and the customer agree upon the conditions of the sexual service (price, sexual practices, etc.), they go to the private area where they can conduct the service in a private room. However, advertising sex services at a hotel or at one’s domicile is not allowed and is punishable with a penal fine (art 199, Swiss penal code).

All erotic massage salons have a manager who rents the rooms to the sex workers. In some instances, sex workers can work alone in a studio, or together with more sex workers in a multiple-room apartment. The managers must ensure that the premises are in a proper state and that the sex workers are legally entitled to work and have a valid work permit or authorization. However, the managers cannot exploit profit from the sex work per se, which means that all gains, in principle, go to the sex workers.

1.2 Criminological Focus: Victimization in Sex Work

Victimization in sex work is a relevant topic because of the various risks that sex workers face during their job (Rekart, 2005). In this regard, victimization has been studied in many countries, as mentioned above, but almost all of these countries prohibit sex work (Barberet, 2000; Berger et al., 2018; Brents & Hausbeck, 2005; Bungay & Guta, 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Chan & Beauregard, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2018; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Peitzmeier et al., 2019; Sanders & Campbell, 2007) with only a few exceptions (Földhazi, 2010; Ros,

2021). These studies described the occupational hazards faced by sex workers, who have an even higher likelihood of becoming victims of murder compared to the general population. However, sex workers' risks also seem dependent on the legal framework of each country (Benoit et al., 2019). In that regard, it has been demonstrated that sex workers' victimization is less in countries where sex work is legal (Benoit et al., 2019), even though more extensive research is needed on these legalities.

To a lesser extent, sex workers' drug use has also caught the attention of academia, specifically of those sex workers who work to finance their drug addiction (Surratt et al., 2004; Young et al., 2000). These studies focused specifically on drug-addicted sex workers, while the drug consumption among a general sample of sex workers has only scarcely been addressed by scholarship. One of the only exceptions is the Swiss study of Lociciro et al. (2017) who found that the rates of consumption of illegal drugs are higher than those of the general population, but they were still low and did not exceed 10% among sex workers.

Academia has endorsed the use of qualitative methods to study the victimization and drug use of sex workers. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted in different countries with different laws for sex work (Barberet, 2000; Brents & Hausbeck, 2005; Bungay & Guta, 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Földhazi, 2010; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). Quantitative methods such as structured questionnaires have been used to a lesser manner (Berger et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Lociciro et al., 2017; Peitzmeier et al., 2019; Surratt et al., 2004; Young et al., 2000). Another type of data that proved useful for conducting research was police data (Chan & Beauregard, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2018; Potterat, 2004) and, to a lesser extent, focus groups (Surratt et al., 2004). It is worth mentioning that Campbell et al. (2019) applied participatory action research in which they incorporated their gatekeeper (an aid organization) in the design of their study.

2 Fieldwork: Being in the Right Place at the Right Moment with the Right Colleagues

Between 2016 and 2021, together with other colleagues, we interviewed or surveyed around 140 sex workers in three main studies whose aims were to understand sex workers' victimization, trust in reporting to the police, and their drug use (Molnar et al., 2021; Molnar & Aebi, 2022; Molnar & Ros, 2022). We used interviews, questionnaires, and participant non-systematic observations (see Fig. 9.1). sex workers are considered a hard-to-reach population: One cannot *just go into the field* without knowing anyone or anything about the topic. Former researchers mobilized gatekeepers (e.g., nongovernmental organizations [NGOs] for accessing sex workers (see Barberet, 2000; Berger et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Lociciro et al., 2017; Surratt et al., 2004). Other actors who

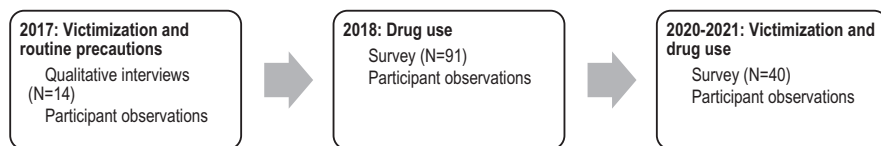


Fig. 9.1 Studies conducted on the domain of sex work

proved useful were the police (Barberet, 2000), owners of sex work clubs (Barberet, 2000; Brents & Hausbeck, 2005), attorneys (Brents & Hausbeck, 2005), and the press (Barberet, 2000; Brents & Hausbeck, 2005). The details of these studies are too vast to be explained in this manuscript, which is the reason why we invite the readers to delve into the references for further details.

Our studies were possible because we were practitioners working for an NGO supporting sex workers and assisting them in various domains, such as distributing prophylactic materials, giving advice about the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, assisting them with their administrative duties (e.g., working permits and tax declarations), and accompanying them to the hospital, the police, and elsewhere. We therefore did not need a gatekeeper because we were in the field on a regular basis, in both the prostitution areas and the erotic massage salons. In the former, the social workers of the NGO were onsite from 10 p.m. to 1:30 a.m., driving a caravan to three different emplacements. Sex workers could enter the caravan and stay for a while, have a beverage and a snack, obtain prophylactic materials (condoms, gel, and tissues), and receive orientation and counseling. On a weekly basis, the social workers visited the erotic massage salons of the whole canton of Vaud, usually during the afternoon, and offered sex workers the same kind of information and materials. I thereby approached my field via my professional practice, and most of the participants knew me long before I started the data collection. My ethnic background was an asset in this case because I was born in Romania and grew up in Spain, and I am fluent in Romanian, Spanish, French, and English. My linguistic skills greatly facilitated my research because the sex workers in Switzerland are frequently foreigners. The rapport was constructed during months in which, due to my work, confidentiality and anonymity were constantly addressed.

The first study (Molnar & Aebi, 2022) referred to the work-related victimization that sex workers ($N = 14$) endured during their professional experiences, their perceptions of the Swiss police, their reporting to the police, and the prevention techniques that they used to prevent victimization. The second study (Molnar et al., 2021) addressed the drug consumption of sex workers ($N = 91$), which was previously scarcely studied.¹ The third study (Molnar & Ros, 2022; Ros & Molnar, 2022) studied the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sex workers.

¹In the decades of 1990s–2000s, there were many drug-addicted sex workers who used heroin and did prostitution in order to finance their addiction. The NGO assisted them in the same manner as the other sex workers by exchanging their used syringes for new ones in order to increase the sex workers' safety when using and to take the used syringes out of the public domain. The sex workers would take their new syringes and go somewhere else to use drugs because the caravan was not

3 Getting Started: Pragmatism as a Guiding Light

The first study that we conducted in 2017 (Molnar & Aebi, 2022) was the foundation for the other two, and therefore, it is the most important of the three. I started working for the NGO in 2016 as a social worker, since the position of *criminologist* did not exist. At that time, I had already been volunteering for 4 years in Spain for Doctors of the World (Médicos del Mundo) in assisting sex workers, and I was especially interested in the work-related violence endured by sex workers. The director of the NGO, Silvia Pongelli, also quickly manifested her interest in this topic, because the association lacked systematic knowledge on this area, and they wished to do more to tackle violence. We therefore decided to initiate a study on the violence endured by sex workers.

Our research, far away from academic purposes, had a purely pragmatic goal: to understand sex workers' victimization in order to propose prevention strategies to the sex workers that we encounter on a daily basis. This was later reached via the Previst project (Molnar, 2019, 2021) that we designed and that was financed by the Swiss Federal Police. The data collection would take place approximately 1 year after I was hired by the NGO as a social worker. At that time, my field experience was about 1100 hours. These observations were not done with any goal since they were part of "the job," but, of course, they allowed me to gather considerable insider knowledge prior to conducting the interviews.

Nowadays, it is typical to start the research by submitting a protocol to the ethics committee (see Berger et al., 2018), but this was not our case. At that time, no one belonged to any university and the board of the NGO was positive about the project and its specifics. The director and I had some background in social science research, and so we planned the research and brainstormed on the potential risks, being logically inspired by articles that had already problematized these issues (especially Shaver, 2005).

We prepared a research protocol in which we planned the methodology that was to be used. In this case, it was a qualitative method using interviews. We also brainstormed and decided on many of the ethical and methodological aspects. Similar to Barberet (2000) and Sanders (2001), we planned an interview guide containing the main topics we wanted to address in our interviews.

This was also the case for the study of the sex workers' drug use and the impacts of the pandemic on the sex workers. For both cases, we prepared questionnaires guided by the feedback from fellow colleagues (social psychologists, doctors, and social workers) that were as well-prettested with several people (depending on the case with sex workers and non-sex workers). We also planned to keep a diary during the fieldwork in which we reported our own impressions about the questionnaires.

a space for drug consumption. However, in the previous years, fewer and fewer syringes were exchanged in the caravan of Fleur de Pavé to the point that in 2021 colleagues exchanged less than 10 yearly versus the 950 exchanged in 2010.

Some quotations from the diary are used in the next sections to illustrate the challenges we faced.

Following the recommendation of Shaver (2005) regarding the need to include heterogeneity among the sex worker samples, our first study's goal was to reach around 12 to 16 sex workers with four different profiles: (1) cisgender women, (2) transgender women, (3) sex workers of legal status, and (4) sex workers of illegal status. We decided that we would not include those sex workers whom we knew were victims of trafficking in human beings or pimping because of the distinctive characteristics and types of violence endured, which could not be generalized to the other sex workers. Nevertheless, this was also a way to protect the potential participants by avoiding situations such as those mentioned by Sanders (2001): "On one occasion a sex worker was physically assaulted by her pimp as punishment for taking part in the research" (Sanders, 2001, p. 8).

Basic ethical rules regarding the anonymous and confidential characteristics of the study (Barberet, 2000; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010) were also applied in our study, but we emphasized the fact that no one from the NGO would know about their answers. Our interviews would follow the same approach used for our interventions, which was to show the maximum respect for the self-determination of the sex workers. This is slightly different from other studies, such as Shaver's study (2005, see quotation below). That research, even if ethically correct, was conducted solely by scholars, and therefore, it is understandable that they were "insistent" when recruiting participants. We decided to avoid this in order to follow the line of action of the NGO.

We also made it clear during these conversations that participation was voluntary and that we would take no for an answer and move on politely. In doing so, however, we also pointed out that, although it was their right to say no to an interview, it was our job to keep on trying. (Shaver, 2005, p. 301)

Together with the NGO's director, we decided another important aspect was my safety and that of my interviewees. We also decided that I would recruit the sex workers during working hours when I worked in tandem with a colleague. At all times, I would inform her about where I was going and at what time to conduct the interviews. We decided that we would obtain consent orally so that the sex workers could avoid providing too much personal data. This is not different from other studies (Bungay & Guta, 2018; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Sanders, 2001; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). It is highly probable that today this might be criticized by the ethical committees at most universities, but hard-to-reach populations do not share the same type of cultural views as people belonging to Western, Educated, Industrialized, Religious, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies.

4 Techniques Employed: Much Diversity, But Never Enough Data!

4.1 *Sampling Challenges and Participant Recruitment*

The first challenge that one faces when conducting research with sex workers is the sample size. In this regard, we kept in mind the following:

The size and boundaries of the [sex worker] population are unknown, so it is extremely difficult to get a representative sample. The traditional methods of sampling such populations—snowball sampling, key informant sampling, and targeted sampling—do not solve this problem. (Shaver, 2005, p. 296).

In each of our studies, we aimed to cover all profiles and heterogeneity of sex work. For that, we approached sex workers who worked (1) in the streets, (2) in the erotic massage salons, (3) those who came to the office of the NGO, and (4) those working on the Internet. The latter were included only for the last study. In terms of sample distribution, we obtained a majority of cisgender women and some transgender sex workers but no men. In terms of age, we reached approximately a representative sample of sex workers. The same is true for people in legal and illegal situations.

Having in mind the need for heterogeneity in the samples, we approached the sex workers most of the time during our working hours and let them know about our research. It might not be obvious from the beginning, but the naming and explaining of a study are cardinal issues. For instance, Barberet (2000) avoided using the word “victim” and instead used “safety.” In our case, we decided to use a broad description and present the study as “a study on the experiences in sex work” as well as “experiences of sex workers during COVID-19 pandemic.” However, with regard to the drug use study, we had no choice but to call it, “Use of psychoactive substances and medication among sex workers active in the streets of Lausanne (prostitution area) and in the salons of the canton of Vaud.” We had no major issues about the naming, except for one sex worker who inferred that we assumed that sex workers were a vector for COVID-19 and a few who commented that “they do not take drugs,” to which I replied that we are interested in knowing about those who take drugs and those who do not.

Details count when recruiting sex workers participants: being very conscious of the space we occupied in relation to those approached; never corner a person in a doorway, or if with a partner, never approach a sex worker from two sides. Leaving them room to move away is a courteous way to demonstrate that you are not the police. More important, it provides a clear indication that the choice to participate is theirs. (Shaver, 2005, p. 302).

We applied the same principles when recruiting the sex workers. Interestingly, sex workers were interested in being interviewed but not in the places that we planned in our first protocol (Molnar & Aebi, 2022). We hoped that interviews were carried out offsite and outside of working hours in a neutral environment that facilitates discussion out of the sight of indiscreet third parties. However, the sex workers

proposed that the interviews happen in the prostitution area or the massage parlors. Even though at the beginning I was quite tenacious to enforce this “rule,” from the 14 sex workers that I interviewed, this “ideal scenario” happened only around eight times. Actually, then I realized that some sex workers—especially those who worked indoors or who combined indoor with outdoor work—were tremendously busy and had no time for drinking coffee with a researcher. We therefore conducted the interviews in the caravan of the NGO when it was transited by other sex workers who were not speakers of that language; in the street, next to the caravan but far away from other people; in one of the remotest streets of the prostitution neighborhood; and even in the erotic massage salons in empty rooms. Surprisingly, this seemed to have worked since the sex workers showed signs of feeling comfortable despite the environment.

Therefore, for the other two studies (Molnar et al., 2021; Molnar & Ros, 2022), we were more relaxed and confident about this manner of interviewing, and most of our data collection took place “in the field.” This was not unique to our study. For instance, Barberet (2000) faced the same problem: Even though her team’s ambition was to interview the sex workers in “private places,” those working at rural clubs did not have any possibility of going outside. Földhazi (2010) and Sanders (2001) stated that they chose sex workers’ place of work, without going into too much detail.

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, we decided to go hybrid. Besides face-to-face surveys, we also conducted online surveys, taking, for example, the innovative study of Campbell et al. (2019) who interviewed the sex workers remotely. Equipped with face masks and hand sanitizers, we surveyed sex workers at the NGO’s office, erotic massage salons in the afternoons, and the street at night. We also rendered our questionnaire online in all four languages mentioned previously—French, English, Romanian, and Spanish—and disseminated it either via the erotic announces formularies or via WhatsApp by sending it to the public telephone number that was announced in the advertisement. Only seven people answered the online questionnaire, but among the 40 members of the sample, this seems like an adequate proportion. Nevertheless, several sex workers misunderstood our study and wrote us back asking for more information.

[11:16, 17.02.2021] SW2: “Excuse me who are you and where did you get my phone number? I don’t give out personal information.”

[11:17, 17.02.2021] Lorena: “Hi, I’m Lorena Molnar. I work for the University of Lausanne, and we are doing a study on the impact of the pandemic on the lives of sex workers. I found the number on [website].”

[11:17, 17.02.2021] SW2: “I don’t know who you are.”

4.2 Procedure During the Data Collection

Most studies conducted their data collection face-to-face and audiotaped and transcribed the interviews (Barberet, 2000; Brents & Hausbeck, 2005; Bungay & Guta, 2018; Földhazi, 2010; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). This was our procedure: For all

interviews, except one, I could audio record. For the remaining one, I took manuscript notes. This was due to the fact that the sex worker did not feel comfortable about being recorded.

For the surveys, we did not have this need, as the data were recorded on an online survey platform called LimeSurvey. I admit that we did not really put much thought into our choice of the platform. It was a secure platform and the one for which the subscription was paid by the NGO and later by the University of Lausanne. It is still important to consider this aspect beforehand in order to ensure that the answers are protected and confidentiality is assured. I collected the data on a tablet or on my phone via an online questionnaire in Romanian, French, Spanish, and English. There were also a couple of sex workers who were not fluent in any of the languages proposed, and for reaching out them, we counted on the assistance of a social worker from the NGO who was fluent in the specific languages.

Already in the 1990s, scholars discussed “validity” and “reliability” in the domain of sex work. An instrument is valid if it measures in an efficient manner a phenomenon and is reliable if, when used in repeated occasions, one always obtains the same outcome no matter who uses it (Aebi, 2006). Vis-à-vis the former, the impossibility of reaching out to high-level sex workers such as escorts or male sex workers is a challenge. Regarding the latter, the social desirability, the labeling of the questions, or the characteristics of the interviewer can pose serious problems in research. For instance, Barberet (2000) discussed the sex workers who claim “that everything is great” and do not elaborate much; this is a sign that the sex workers are not being honest with the researcher.

In our studies, we faced similar validity challenges. Even though we included several escorts, we could seldom find any men who did sex work. Another measuring problem was related to the estimation of the number of times that they had been victims of a crime. Sex workers did not remember these details and just answered “many times,” “sometimes,” “a couple of times,” etc. The same happened with their estimation of their monthly income, which prevented us from calculating their economic status. Regarding reliability, it is also worth mentioning that the labeling of our questions was challenging in some instances. For example, in the drug use study (Molnar et al., 2021), we realized that even though a sex worker is a regular drug user, she would be acquainted with a maximum of three substances. However, our questionnaire addressed the consumption of more than 10 drugs. As well, when asking the sex workers if they were at risk for COVID-19 and enumerated to them the list of conditions that put one at risk (advanced age, high blood pressure, diabetes, etc.), a sex worker responded negatively, but afterward she let us know by coincidence that she actually has high blood pressure.

The interview went very well, seemed wary at first, then very happy to talk (thanked me several times). Hard to get her to tell me how many clients insisted that she lowers prices. She didn't say how much she was making...I don't feel like she didn't want to say, but couldn't figure out monthly average (even when I insisted, “Can you give me an approximate figure?”). (Fieldwork journal, January 2021).

The data storage of the participants' responses is seldom mentioned by the scholars that studied the sex workers. The exception is Campbell et al. (2019) who mention that the interviews "were recorded on a digital recorder, under strict data management procedures due to the sensitive nature of the data and the need for high levels of security around identity of the participants."

In our case, we stored the first interviews on an external hardware and then on a safe server at our university. Surveys were stored on the university's LimeSurvey platform. In this regard, anonymization is a highly relevant aspect: Samples with sex workers tend to be small and local, rendering them easily recognizable. To protect the sex workers' anonymity, I avoided disclosing in our papers too many of the socio-demographic characteristics of specific interviewees, and I only provided general information about the sample. Also, we "baptized" our participants with pseudonyms, in one case, chosen randomly from the novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Larsson, 2017).

4.3 Data Analysis

The section data analysis seems to be the least extensive in the papers that address sex workers, and I believe that this should be different. In our studies, we used both quantitative and qualitative techniques for analyzing the data. First, content analysis, used by many scholars (Barberet, 2000; Sanders & Campbell, 2007), was especially enlightening to understand the victimization endured by the sex workers and its contexts, as well as the feelings and perceptions of the sex workers during and after their victimization. We analyzed the interviews horizontally, going through each transcript, and after identifying the recurrent topics, we also analyzed them transversally, going across transcripts through each topic identified.

We also created a small database with relevant variables emerging from the interviews that could not be grasped in a qualitative manner; for instance, the number of different victimizations endured by the same person is known as the so-called *variety* (Aebi, 2006). In this way, we could analyze that data by groups (transgender versus cisgender), status (legal versus illegal), the number of victimizations reported, the multiple victimizations, etc. We gained a better picture of the victimizations of the sample group, while not neglecting the context details.

The two surveys that we conducted with 91 sex workers and 40 sex workers (Molnar et al., 2021; Molnar & Ros, 2022) allowed us to do descriptive analyses of frequencies and cross-tabulation. In the first survey, we also conducted a logistical regression. Since the sample was not large ($N = 91$) and the sex workers' drug consumption was low, we could not compute a "predictive model" of the risk factors that increased drug use in sex work. Instead, we only analyzed two risk factors—age and place of work—in relation to using alcohol and tobacco. The reason is that these were the substances consumed at a higher rate and therefore the only ones that could be statistically analyzed. Although this is unfortunate, it is the reality of many surveys that explore rare phenomena among hard-to-reach populations.

5 Ethical, Emotional, and Safety-Related Considerations

In my view, the first ethical challenge about studying sex work is its socially controverted character (Benoit et al., 2019). In this regard, almost everyone has an “philosophic” position about the phenomenon and several scholars perceive sex workers as perennial victims. This can influence the relationship with the participants and the manner in which we treat them. Furthermore, “Prostitution is commonly treated as an identity category rather than a revenue-generating activity” (Shaver, 2005, p. 297). This can increase the risk that researchers do not treat their participants as adults with agency but as “inherent victims.” Our position vis-à-vis sex work coincided with the one adopted in the legislation of Switzerland. In other words, we considered the sex workers as adults who, for different reasons, worked in the sex industry. It must be stressed that in our studies we also adopted a *post-positivist philosophy*, which consists of describing and analyzing the data as objectively as possible, while keeping a *reflexive* orientation (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This did not prevent us from being misunderstood and having our manuscripts rejected by anonymous referees who had different philosophical positions regarding sex workers.

Other ethical dilemmas appeared when conducting research in sex work, namely the psychological and safety-related risks, participants’ recompense, and sex workers’ stigmatization. Barberet (2000) refers to the participants’ sadness and tears after remembering some traumatic event, and Sanders (2001, p. 8) mentions the risks for sex workers’ safety:

On one occasion, a sex worker was physically assaulted by her pimp as punishment for taking part in the research. This highlighted the risks that individuals took to be part of the research. These ethical dilemmas highlight the difficulties of doing research in a community that is saturated with violence and suspicion of officials.

Having this in mind, we aimed to minimize this risk by being transparent about the research with the whole group of sex workers. We approached a group and explained in public our study in generic terms (“experiences in sex work,” “challenges of sex work,” and “substance consumption”) and tell them that the NGO is interested in these topics and would like to discuss with as many sex workers as possible. We also stated that we wanted to discover the general trends and not the details about individuals in order to understand in which areas we can assist better.

Physical threats also affected the researcher. For instance, they might come simply from being outdoors at night, from the sex workers, or from criminals such as pimps or criminal networks. Although I did not directly face most of them, I was, on a few occasions, confronted by strong reactions from the sex workers. The sex workers, especially if they are going through a difficult time, might easily feel judged, such as a sex worker who thought that we had inferred that she was a vector of the coronavirus. Passersby or customers can also pose a risk. For instance, as a woman in her 20s, I was faced with passersby who assumed that I was a sex worker and requested a sexual service.

Regarding the psychological risks that sex workers encounter when participating in these kinds of studies, we decided to pose our questions in a broad manner, e.g., “Did a customer impose sexual practices that you were not comfortable with?” After affirmative responses, we tried to clarify the event by asking for more details. Conversely, if the participant decided not to elaborate, we respected her wish without further insistence.

The latter situation is related to the need to connect and sympathize with the sex workers (Barberet, 2000). However, an almost unavoidable asymmetrical situation emerges at the end of an interview. In principle, a criminologist would be satisfied if they found out the relatively important prevalence of sex workers’ victimization and interesting details that can enlighten further research and public policies. Conversely, a participant who has been the victim of a crime, or of several, does not necessarily feel the same enthusiasm. On the contrary, she might feel especially vulnerable after the interview.

In our research, we referred the participants to the NGO, letting them know that social workers are also available to discuss violence and rights in case of victimization and accompany the sex workers to victim assistance services. Listening to the sex workers’ experiences of violence can affect the researchers’ mental health. Mirror neurons activate automatically in humans, and naturally, we were emotionally affected when we met people suffering from crude violence, poverty, or, a few times, illnesses such as HIV. Writing in a journal or debriefing colleagues or my closest acquaintances has always been beneficial. Personally, I prefer debriefing about my emotions with my inner circle and letting fellow colleagues offer better methodological advice.

In the first two studies, we offered a sort of recompense either paying for the beverage of the sex workers who agreed to be interviewed or offering her something such as a body lotion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic highly limited our possibilities to offer recompense since the study was conducted without any funding. Sanders (2001) develops a very interesting reflection by illustrating her own dilemma regarding this issue. The advantage highlighted was the acknowledgment of sex workers’ participation. The disadvantages of giving a recompense were the feeling of exploiting the sex workers or the fear that they would use the money to buy drugs. Most of the time, researchers cited a material recompense for the sex workers that consisted of the payment of some pocket money of around \$20 (Barberet, 2000; Bungay & Guta, 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Sanders, 2001).

The last ethical consideration is the risk of stigmatizing the sex workers. In my view, scholars should be selective about their presence in the field and shift weight onto the relevance of our studies and the inconvenience that our presence is going to cause to the sex workers’ participants. They might feel like research “objects” who are often studied but seldom assisted in tackling their daily problems. We should also reflect in advance on the manner in which our research might affect sex workers’ public image. For me, this poses a great dilemma because, in my view, one must be faithful to the data and avoid *activism-led science*. At the same time, one also needs to be aware of the limitations of the studies and report and communicate them in the clearest manner.

6 Plan, But Be Flexible: Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

This section summarizes the lessons that I, an early career researcher in criminology, learned during my fieldwork. First, understanding the context before collecting data from participants is highly useful. I recommend taking advantage of all opportunities to talk with the actors involved in sex work: sex workers, social workers, neighbors, police, etc. Once one has the whole picture, the data collection is likely to be richer. Understanding all parties could also be positive for the researchers' and participants' safety. This was, in my case, happening naturally because of my role as a social worker. However, this should be part of the research protocol if one does not count as an "insider" or one who is not an insider themselves.

Second, when planning a study, consider that in central European countries, there are many foreign sex workers, hence having a multilingual team can be an invaluable asset and increase the validity and the reliability of the research. During the research protocol, it is vital to be rigorous but also open-minded and creative. Most research protocols in sex work might need to be revisited and adjusted. As well, there might be threats or difficulties that have not been anticipated. Therefore, it is imperative to imagine a series of scenarios that could degenerate, such as if a sex worker has a panic attack when conducting the interview, a participant insists on being part of an individual interview, a participant expects more recompense, or a participant who does not show up.

As recommended by Barberet (2000), research with sex workers needs empathetic researchers; thus, "emotion" is something to anticipate when designing the research protocol in the sense that the interviewer might react to crude events with a certain degree of emotion. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a sex worker disclosed to me that she had been homeless and could not eat much during that time. I could not help my reaction of telling her that I was sorry that she was facing such a difficult situation. I also paused the interview to let her know that the NGO could assist her in finding temporary housing and give her vouchers for the supermarket. In that regard, it might be desirable that early career researchers receive emotional training so they can debrief others and prepare themselves for the anticipated fieldwork. Alone in front of a mirror, practice approaching participants, asking questions, and dealing with refusals. In relation to refusals, I recommend to never take the refusals of no-shows personally or visibly become irritated with the participant. This is wrong both from an ethical and strategic point of view. Some potential participants lose interest in participating in the study and it is their right, but others might recover their interest after some time if the researcher is still in the field.

During the data collection, be prepared to conduct imperfect research. One prepares with much care the interview plan and the topics and subtopics one would like to address in order to answer satisfactorily to the research questions. In actual practice, it is possible that all topics will not be covered during the interview because the participant is willing to address the theme that is most important for them. It is recommended to redirect the conversation, but just as important is to give space to

the interviewee and avoid over-insisting. In case of conducting surveys in the streets or in erotic massage salons, collecting the data on online platforms is a safer option. If one is the victim of a theft or simply loses the device, the data will not be lost or accessible. Because of sex workers' lack of time and lack of accustomedness, I recommend avoiding long questionnaires, such as the *International Crime Victims Survey* (van Dijk et al., 2007). If applied to sex workers, this questionnaire should be adapted. The length of the questionnaire is not a straightforward issue to decide. On one hand, one needs nuance in order to understand satisfactorily a phenomenon, but on the other, too much nuance can challenge the reliability of the study by the response burden.

Take care of your participants and their privacy. Consider beforehand your storage and anonymization strategy. Be faithful to your commitments, and honor your promises toward your interviewees and be grateful for the time and intimacy they shared with you. However, if you feel overwhelmed, I suggest leaving the field at least temporarily. Too much emotion can blur your perceptions and the validity of your research.

7 Conclusion

Research on the sex work industry is an interesting but challenging area. The collaboration with NGOs is highly valuable since they already have a strong rapport with the sex workers. Observations, interviews, and surveys are possible and complementary, but they need careful consideration in order to be adapted to the sex workers' characteristics and to the sex work settings, i.e., legality or illegality. Safety of both the researchers and the participants should be at the core of the research protocol, which should be flexible enough to handle unexpected events. Emotional intelligence is vital in order to interact with interviewees and to gain perspectives when gathering and analyzing the data.

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Chapter 10

Fieldwork and Ethical Challenges on Criminological Research with Immigrants



Bertha Prado-Manrique 

1 Introduction

The Observatory of the Crime Control System toward Immigration (OCSPI) is a Spanish research group dedicated to studying the migration phenomenon from a criminological perspective. The Observatory was founded in 2015, and the author of this chapter is a member of the OCSPI group. The main objective of the OCSPI is to understand the relationship between the different dimensions of the criminal justice system and the migrant population, in particular those considered as suspects, accused, convicted, ex-convicted, and victims. In this sense, we provide elements to understand which factors may influence the crimes committed by immigrants, as well as the victimization they may suffer. We also analyze the effectiveness of the criminal justice system's response to both phenomena. The OCSPI also seeks to explore immigrants' perceptions of different actors in the criminal justice system, such as the police or the courts. All this with the aim of contributing to the development of proposals for the prevention of crime and victimization among the immigrant population, as well as the visibility of good practices in this field. To this end, it organizes its research around nine areas of observation relating to immigration and various aspects of the criminal justice system: the police, the judiciary, prisons, immigration detention centers, young immigrants, immigrant victimization, deportations, displaced persons and borders, public opinion, and the media (OCSPI, 2015).

Throughout its existence, the OCSPI has carried out various research projects funded by different national and international institutions (OCSPI, 2015). All these projects have aimed to explore the characteristics of different groups of migrants and their relationship with the criminal justice system and to evaluate crime prevention and victimization programs. In chronological order, the research projects

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carried out by OCSPI and in which the author of this chapter has participated are as follows:

- (i) *DIA Project (2015–2018)* Delinquency of Settled Immigrants in Spain (*Delincuencia de inmigrantes asentados en España*). The project aimed to explore the relationship between crime and immigration in the Spanish context (García-España et al., 2020). Specifically, we sought to identify the risk and protective factors of the host context that may influence the delinquency of settled immigrants. This was an exploratory project using a quantitative methodology. We applied 174 self-report questionnaires administered in Málaga (Spain), covering settled immigrants' perceptions of housing and neighborhood, family and social relationships, criminal history and perceptions of the criminal justice system, and legitimacy and trust in the police.
- (ii) *PREMECE Program (2018–2019)*. Crime prevention of unaccompanied foreign minors in the streets of the city of Ceuta (*Prevención de la delincuencia de Menores Extranjeros solos en las calles de Ceuta*). This project aimed to reduce the criminogenic and victimological risk factors of unaccompanied foreign minors living on the streets in Ceuta, a Spanish autonomous city in North Africa. PREMECE applied the action research methodology, which seeks to approach the specific problems of a community in an active and collaborative way, with the aim of proposing possible solutions to the problems identified (Somekh, 2005). To this end, PREMECE organized its work around three pillars: (i) the Drari team, made up of two social educators and a psychologist, who supervised the psychosocial street intervention; (ii) street activities based on the Prosocial Thinking Programme—abbreviated version—PPS-VCJ; and (iii) coordination with key municipal actors responsible for the protection and control of foreign minors in street situations in Ceuta. This required both participant observation and street intervention. The themes addressed during the street intervention with these minors were traumatic experiences during their journey, administrative situation, criminal history, and episodes of victimization. Data were collected through field diaries and through individual reports (García España et al., 2021a).
- (iii) *EV-ÖDOS Project (2018–2020)*. Unprotected and invisible victims: Assessment of new protection solutions for immigrant women and minors' victims. (*Víctimas desprotegidas e invisibles: Valoración de nuevas fórmulas de protección de mujeres y menores inmigrantes víctimas*). This was an evaluation of the ÖDOS program, which is a secondary prevention program for the victims of human trafficking that aims to protect African women accompanied by minors or pregnant women who arrive by boat on the Andalusian coast and who may be potential victims of trafficking. The evaluation required a methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data from the ÖDOS on the profile of the foreign women involved in the program, the intervention process itself, and the perceptions of the ÖDOS staff or professionals working with the program (García España et al., 2021b).

- (iv) *JEPRAN Project (2021–2023)*. Foreign Former Foster Minors in Andalusian Prisons (*Jóvenes extranjeros extutelados en las prisiones de Andalucía*). The project, which is still ongoing at the time of writing, aims to shed light on the legal crossroads that foreign former foster children encounter during their migration, transition to adulthood, and situation in prison. JEPRAN focuses on identifying the risk and protective factors in their trajectories until their arrival in prison, as well as the opportunities and challenges for their reintegration after leaving prison. To this end, we are using a quantitative approach based on questionnaires administered to young people in prison. In addition, this information will be complemented by the triangulation of qualitative data about their childhood, their migratory paths, or their experiences in reception centers (Proyecto JEPRAN, 2020).

Based on our experience in conducting the above projects, this chapter aims to describe the practical and ethical challenges of criminological research with immigrants. As well as to illustrate some useful alternatives and strategies for overcoming fieldwork challenges for future criminological research with immigrants. It is worth noting that the migrant population is characterized by its heterogeneity (Goodson & Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2017) and sometimes is a hard-to-reach, vulnerable population (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). In some cases, migrants are also at risk of being discriminated against by native groups (Adikaram et al., 2022). In addition, some are at risk of social exclusion and marginalization due to harsh migration policies. For example, settled migrants or young migrants in an irregular situation avoid being located by the police or immigration officials for fear of being arrested and/or deported. The same can be said of potential victims of trafficking in women arriving on the Andalusian coast in small boats (García España et al., 2021b) or unaccompanied foreign minors, especially those living on the streets. The latter are also stigmatized as criminals (García España et al., 2021a). All of these characteristics pose practical and ethical challenges for the researcher in relation to the different stages of fieldwork, which we will address below.

2 Access to Fieldwork

A challenging step in criminological research with migrants is to identify potential participants, to decide on the role of the researcher and the pilot phase. The selection of gatekeepers is crucial to this, and it is suggested that the characteristics of the population under study should be analyzed beforehand as a strategy for finding the most appropriate and legitimate person for the task (Adikaram et al., 2022). A gatekeeper is socially recognized by the target group and helps the researcher to be accepted by its members. Furthermore, given the objects of study in criminological research, it may be necessary to contact criminal justice officials to gain access to the field (Díaz-Fernández, 2019).

Social educators were the gatekeepers of the PREMECE program. They were in close contact with homeless unaccompanied foreign minors. These gatekeepers introduced the researchers to the area where these young people used to stay (i.e., the port area of Ceuta). This facilitated contact between the Drari team and these minors, as well as the work carried out under the PREMECE program (García España et al., 2021a). In the case of the DIA project, NGOs working with immigrants were contacted to identify settled immigrants to participate in the project, as well as to discover the places frequented by immigrants in Malaga (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020). Finally, to reach the foreign former foster youth in prison (JEPRAN project), the OCSPI team requested permission from the penitentiary institutions to enter the prison. Then, we had to contact the directors of each prison in Andalusia to coordinate the fieldwork. An additional burden was the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to ensure the continuity of the project without endangering the health of the researchers, prison staff, or inmates.

3 Fieldwork Challenges

3.1 *Sampling Frame*

Drawing the sampling frame, that is, defining the number of participants needed for the research (Font & Méndez, 2013), is a difficult task when studying immigrants. Sampling frames are usually imperfect, and the characteristics of the immigrant population exacerbate this (Font & Méndez, 2013). This was the case for both the DIA project and the PREMECE program. In both cases, there was no universe from which to construct the sampling frame. There was no official register of settled immigrants, nor an official register of homeless unaccompanied foreign minors. To overcome this limitation, we used non-probability sampling as an alternative to locate the immigrant population and approximate some of its characteristics (Reichel & Morales, 2017).

We used the snowball technique, aware of its limitations, such as reduced reference points and participants' refusal to refer us to other potential respondents. In the DIA project, we first contacted several settled immigrants who had been referred to us by gatekeepers. Once the interviews were completed, we asked them to put us in touch with two or three people they thought might be interested in participating in the project. As this was not always achieved, we used "time-space" sampling (Reichel & Morales, 2017) to identify new participants, which involves researchers visiting places that are usually frequented by immigrants at a given time. In this sense, we visited contiguous Spanish neighborhoods with a high concentration of immigrants and even attended Spanish courses for foreigners held by several NGOs (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020). On the other hand, the snowball technique was much easier to apply within the PREMECE program. In this regard, after the gatekeepers introduced the Drari team to the unaccompanied minors, they contacted other minors and informed them about the existence of the Drari team (García España et al., 2021a).

3.2 *Addressing Sensitive Issues*

Addressing sensitive issues (e.g., offending and victimization) is challenging, especially when the participants in your research may feel insecure because of their circumstances. For example, settled migrants or young foreigners in an irregular situation may believe that their disclosure of offending experiences will be reported to the police by the researcher and may be reluctant to give an honest answer (García España, 2016; García-España et al., 2020). With regard to homeless foreign minors, our experience shows that psychosocial intervention can be a valuable tool to address sensitive topics, not only about crime, but also about episodes of victimization. During this intervention, the Drari team organized activities aimed at promoting prosocial thinking, providing tools for managing emotions and conflict resolution. It also provided psychological support to the children participating in PREMECE. All this made it possible to gradually build up a relationship with these minors, which led them to open up and share their experiences as victims or perpetrators (García España et al., 2021a).

Another strategy to deal with sensitive issues is the use of self-reporting techniques, which allows us to approach unreported crime and has become an alternative to complete the panorama of criminality of certain groups that provide the official data. We have developed self-report questionnaires for both the DIA (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020) and the JEPRAN projects. Both questionnaires covered different topics. Among them is the perception or experience with the institutions of the penal system—police, courts, and prisons. There were also questions about their experiences of victimization. To reduce the telescoping effect (Jungertas, 1992) we used temporal guidelines like “in the last 12 months” or “in the last year” in the questionnaire of the DIA project (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020). In JEPRAN, we designed a graphic timeline that includes different stages in the life of the foreign former foster minor, from his arrival in Spain as a minor to his entry and experience in prison.

3.3 *Pilot Phase*

The pilot phase is another important aspect of fieldwork. During this phase, the researcher will be able to test the tools and techniques chosen for the study. This first contact with the field and with the participants will make it possible to identify the need to adapt the chosen tools to ensure that the respondents or interviewees understand the aims and implications of the research. It is also the perfect time to identify those uncomfortable questions that need to be reformulated or that require the assistance of an interpreter (Crow & Semmens, 2006). This happened in the DIA and JEPRAN projects. For example, in the DIA project, during the pilot phase we found that some questions were difficult to understand because participants did not know what they were referring to, for example, the questions about the consequences of

committing a crime as an immigrant in Spain, because some of the respondents did not know how the Spanish criminal justice system works. We modified them by clarifying the wording of the options for these questions. Although, during the data collection phase it was necessary to explain to the participants what these consequences could be due to the lack of knowledge on specific immigration legislation (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020).

3.4 Data Collection Tools and Data Analysis

With regard to data collection instruments with the immigrant population, it is worth noting the widespread use of the survey and the questionnaire (Font & Méndez, 2013; Reichel & Morales, 2017). Sometimes, the fact that it is a self-administered questionnaire conveys a greater security regarding the anonymity of the identity. However, the self-administered nature can be disadvantageous if the participant does not understand a question and cannot ask for its meaning. This can affect the non-response, the abandonment of the survey or the quality of the information provided (Díaz-Fernández, 2019). All of the above occurred in the DIA project. For reasons of time and lack of access to the sample, we developed an online questionnaire. We used Facebook to contact groups of foreigners living in Málaga. First, we asked them if they understood Spanish. Then, we explained the aims of the research, and once they decided to participate, we sent them the link to the online questionnaire. Although we knew that the foreigners understood Spanish and that they could contact us if they had any questions, it could be assumed that some of them had doubts about the linguistic terms used or the meaning of some words and did not ask for clarification (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020).

Similarly, research with migrant populations requires the contextualization of the results obtained in order to understand their reality as closely as possible (Vargas-Silva, 2012). As previous research has shown, the analysis of field diaries can become an extremely useful input for the interpretation of the data collected (Browne, 2013). This was verified during the intervention carried out with the minors who participated in PREMECE. We reviewed the 690 field diaries of the Drari team members during the PREMECE period (April 2018–July 2019). We carried out a thematic content analysis, which allowed us to identify and document, among other things, the experiences of victimization of these minors, such as sexual abuse. Likewise, the analysis of these field diaries helped us to understand their forms of interaction on the street and the risks to which they were exposed (García España et al., 2021a).

Another strategy we used to get a more reliable picture of the characteristics of the immigrant population was methodological triangulation. We used this strategy in both the PREMECE program and EV-ÖDOS. In both cases, quantitative and qualitative methods and data were used to achieve the research objectives. In the case of PREMECE, different data sources were triangulated, such as field diaries, individual diagnostic reports, interviews with key actors, self-reporting and

victimization surveys of minors, the self-assessment questionnaire of the Drari team, and the evaluation of the activities carried out (García España et al., 2021a). In EV-ÖDOS, we triangulated the data provided by the evaluation and legal indicators file, the daily agenda of the ÖDOS team, the initial and final interviews conducted with the women who participated in ÖDOS, and interviews with key actors. We also analyzed the legal reports on cases of family reunification of minors who arrived with the women who were taken to ÖDOS (García España et al., 2021b).

Other challenges related to research tools or techniques may be the cultural or linguistic context in which they were designed and the one where they are supposed to be used. In this respect, it is important to have researchers or field assistants who are native to or familiar with the contextual and cultural characteristics of the population to be surveyed or interviewed. In the DIA project, the target population for the research was of different nationalities, cultures, and languages. The OCSPI team included researchers of different nationalities. However, due to time and budget constraints, it was not possible to have representatives of every nationality potentially involved. In any case, it was assumed that the participants, being settled immigrants, would not have serious communication problems in Spanish (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020). Unlike DIA, PREMECE included in the intervention team professionals who shared the cultural and linguistic background of the unaccompanied migrant children participating in the program. For example, the social educators and the psychologist of the Drari team spoke Dariya, the Arabic dialect spoken by the foreign minors who were in Ceuta. Similarly, the fact that they were of Moroccan origin made it easier to work with these Moroccan adolescents, as they shared cultural traditions. The latter also contributed to the rapport, as we will see below.

3.5 Building Rapport

Another aspect that the researcher has to consider is the strategies to create a comfortable environment and empathy (rapport) with the participant in order to maintain a sincere interaction between the two (Díaz-Fernández, 2019). This is no exception for migrant populations. In addition, when the research implies asking about the person's traumatic experiences, such as those that occurred during their migratory journey or those related to their participation in illegal activities. In this regard, one of the strategies used by the OCSPI team to establish rapport was to have researchers who share common characteristics—nationality, language, and cultural background—with potential participants. As mentioned above, in the case of PREMECE, the members of the Drari team were Muslim and spoke Dariya. These characteristics made it possible to create an environment of trust and fluid communication between the team and the minors.

In the JEPRAN project, we decided to hold two meetings with the participants. As we were going to ask them about their personal lives, we felt that this staged approach would be less intrusive and would show a respectful attitude toward the

participant and their story. The first interview lasted about 10 minutes. Once we were aware that the participant met the requirements of the sample, we explained the aims of the research and asked them if they would like to take part in a second meeting where we would like to explore different aspects of their lives in more depth. If the participants agreed, we scheduled a second meeting where we asked them about their life before entering prison, their migration journey, and their stay in prison. This interview lasted about 40 minutes. Both meetings took place in the dining room of the prison module or in the offices of the social workers available in each module. During these meetings, we found that sharing personal aspects or similar tastes with the inmates—nationality, football teams, favorite food, or hobbies—helped to create a more relaxed environment in which to talk to them.

The above is also related to the role that the researcher intends to assume during the investigation. This role is not neutral but depends on one's epistemological position in relation to the subject or object of study (Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2013), especially when dealing with sensitive issues or when dealing with minority groups that are vulnerable or considered dangerous by society (Fohring, 2020; Adikaram et al., 2022). The OCSPI team has, for the most part, assumed the role of an outsider. Only in the case of PREMECE was an insider–outsider role adopted, which was also in line with the design of the program, which required not only observation but also intervention with unaccompanied migrant children in Ceuta.

3.6 Protective Measures

In terms of safeguarding during fieldwork, researchers worked in pairs when administering questionnaires in the DIA project. Similarly, the street intervention carried out by the Drari team was also carried out in pairs. In addition, the local police in Ceuta were informed of the times when the Drari team would be on the streets, in case a situation arose that required their intervention. In the case of the JEPRAN project, the interviews with the young people in prison were carried out in the rooms provided in each prison module, usually in the psychologist's or social worker's office. We also followed the security instructions of the prison director and the prison staff in each module. For example, they informed us that there was a button in the office to ask them to come if there were any problems during the interviews. In the higher security modules of the prison, the questionnaires were carried out in specially equipped glassed-in rooms, with the special accompaniment of the head of security of that module.

3.7 Leaving the Field

Leaving the field can also pose some practical challenges, especially if sensitive issues have been raised or if a lot of time has been spent with the participants. The researcher is often the only opportunity for the participant to be heard, even more so

when dealing with migrants in another country. This was particularly evident in PREMECE and JEPRAN. In both projects, we explained the objectives and the planned timetable of our research to the foreign minors on the street and to the former foster youth in prison. When it was time to leave the field, in the case of PREMECE, the team organized a farewell day with the foreign minors in street situation who were there at the time and who had participated in the program. On this day, these minors expressed their gratitude to the team for their work, as it had meant a lot to them to have someone to share their story with, as well as their fears and concerns. The PREMECE team also informed the authorities and key actors in the city of the end of the fieldwork and thanked them for their collaboration with the project. Two seminars were then organized, one face-to-face and one online, to share the results with the authorities and civil society. As for JEPRAN, each time we finished an interview, we thanked the participants for their time. We also explained to them that they could access the OCSPI website to consult the results. Similarly, at the end of the fieldwork in each prison, we said goodbye to the educators and prison officers who had facilitated access to the prison modules.

4 The Ethical Challenges of Criminological Research with Immigrants

The ethical implications that we faced were firstly related to obtaining informed and voluntary consent from people participating in the research. In our study, consent was reflected in a protocol that provided clear and assertive information about the general aspects of the study, as well as the strategies we adopted to ensure confidentiality, to maintain the anonymity of participants' identities, to keep the data collected secure, and to minimize the risks to participants. We endeavored to guarantee transparency to the researched and to ensure that they understood the scope and possible implications of their participation, as well as to inform them of their right not to participate or to interrupt their participation if they consider it appropriate (following the recommendations of Maxfield & Babbie, 2017).

In the case of research with migrants, the European Commission (2020) has developed some guidelines for the informed consent of migrants and refugees. They aim to prevent the researcher from adopting an ethnocentric approach to research; on the contrary, the researcher is reminded to respect the values and cultural aspects of the research community (European Commission, 2020). This is in line with the methodological and ethical critique made by Mahalingam and Rabelo (2013) in relation to the cultural deficit model. This model implies approaching the immigrant population from cultural guidelines and hegemonic values, which distorts the interpretation of the information obtained and creates an image of the studied community as culturally inferior.

The European Commission has also addressed the case of particularly vulnerable groups. Thus, in the case of unaccompanied foreign minors, it is recommended that NGOs or authorities provide the necessary support to ensure that the minor

understands the purpose of the survey and is aware of the implications of his or her participation. Similarly, the Commission warns that in certain contexts, requiring signed informed consent may jeopardize the anonymity of the migrant's identity. The European guidelines suggest the use of alternatives such as verbal consent. In situations where there are words that are difficult to understand or translate into another language, it is recommended that a person who shares the cultural characteristics of the participant be present to explain the necessary information that will allow them to accept or refuse their participation in a truly informed way (European Commission, 2020). To ensure compliance with the provisions of informed consent protocols, ethics committees have been set up.

The experience of OCSPI has shown the importance of following the recommendations of the European Commission. In the DIA project, we obtained verbal consent (Carvalho & Prado-Manrique, 2020), while in JEPRAN we asked for verbal and written consent. The former is for the application of the questionnaire, and the latter is for access to their criminal record (Proyecto JEPRAN, 2020). In the case of foreign minors in street situation who participated in PREMECE, since they were under the guardianship of the City of Ceuta, we obtained the consent of the Child Protection Services of Ceuta, the Juvenile Prosecutor's Office, and the verbal consent of the minors who participated in the activities carried out (García España et al., 2021a). In the case of EV-ÖDOS, since it was an evaluation, we obtained permission from the management of the ÖDOS program to collect the information necessary to evaluate its implementation (García España et al., 2021b). In all cases, the confidentiality of the information was guaranteed and the objectives of each research were explained.

We were unable to request a report from the Ethics Committee of the University of Malaga (CEUMA), as this committee is only competent to rule on projects involving human experimentation, the use of biological samples of human origin, animal experimentation, the handling of biological agents, or the use of genetically modified organisms. For this reason, in the case of the DIA, PREMECE, and EV-ÖDOS projects, we comply with the ethical obligations established in the aforementioned European directives, as well as those established in the Code of Ethics for Criminology in Spain (SIEC, 2017). Later, in the case of JEPRAN, a modification of the CEUMA regulations made it possible to obtain a favorable report from this ethics committee (CEUMA, 2013).

The experience of fieldwork has shown that the best predictions and plans of the most diligent teams are exceeded. Anticipating all ethical dilemmas is not an easy task, and it is common for unexpected situations to arise. Interactions between participants and researchers demonstrate the tension between "paper ethics" and "real-world research" (Armstrong et al., 2014). This may arise during fieldwork when the researcher becomes aware of information relating to the commission of a crime, or that the participant has been the victim of a crime, and the researcher must consider whether or not to report this to the authorities. Although it is recommended that the researcher has anticipated this possibility and included it in the informed consent protocol, this is not always the case (Bernuz et al., 2019). For example, with regard to the OCSPI research experience, we could highlight two specific events. The first

was in PREMECE, where the Drari team, while working with the unaccompanied foreign minors, learned that they had been victims of crime. In these cases, the educators and psychologists of the Drari team offered them a space of containment and explained the importance of reporting the incident. This motivated some of the minors to talk about their experiences of victimization with the police officers working with the PREMECE.

The second moment comes from JEPRAN's fieldwork. We interviewed young foreigners in prison, some of whom, during the interview, expressed their intention to commit suicide because of the situation of detention and uncertainty in which they found themselves. These were young people who spoke little Spanish, who were in custody and awaiting trial. This presented us with a dilemma: On the one hand, we feared that the young person's life was in danger and, on the other, we had promised to keep the data and information exchanged confidential. Faced with this situation, we decided on two courses of action. The first was to tell the interviewee to consider discussing his feelings with a prisoner he trusted, or with a prison officer, educator, psychologist, or volunteer with whom he felt comfortable. The second was to check with prison educators and officers whether there was an anti-suicide protocol in place in the prison. Prison staff told us that they did have a protocol for such cases and that certain inmates in each module of the prison had been trained to recognize and act on suspicions of potential suicide.

Various authors suggest that these unexpected dilemmas should be understood as "ethically important moments," both at a methodological and emotional level (Robinson, 2020). Far from being seen as an obstacle to continuing the research, they can be seen as an opportunity to look at the data collection process from a new perspective and to act accordingly. In this context, the researcher acquires an active role that allows them to exercise their reflexivity and continue with the fieldwork, being aware of the context and its ethical implications and acting in accordance with them (Bernuz et al., 2019; Robinson, 2020).

In terms of reflexivity, during EV-ÖDOS the OCSPI team considered interviewing some of the women who had participated in the ÖDOS program. The purpose of this was to better understand their personal needs and their migration journey in order to assess the performance of ÖDOS. However, after learning about some of their experiences, we understood that these women were in an emotionally and psychologically fragile state. For this reason, and with the intention of not subjecting them to the recollection of traumatic experiences in this state, we decided to know their history through the information they had already provided to the ÖDOS program, respecting the ethical guidelines and confidentiality in the treatment of this data.

Finally, another relevant aspect in this section is the measures taken to store and protect the information collected. In the projects where we used questionnaires—DIA or JEPRAN—the initials of the interviewer and the corresponding questionnaire number were recorded. The data collected were then entered into a database that did not contain any information that could identify the participant. The physical copies of the questionnaires were kept in the office of the principal investigator of the project. In the case of PREMECE and EV-ÖDOS, where we conducted

interviews, these were recorded and transcribed by the researchers themselves. The interviews were coded according to the group to which the interviewee belonged—e.g., NGO member and member of the state security forces—while keeping the identity of the participants confidential. The audio recordings and transcripts were stored in the university's institutional cloud. The same applies to documents containing sensitive information, such as the personal files of minors participating in PREMECE. Only researchers participating in PREMECE had access to this information. The university's data protection officer was also informed of these measures.

5 Emotions

The ethical challenges in this field are related to the emotional damage caused not only to the participant but also to the researcher as a result of emotionally demanding research. The criminological research conducted by OCSPI with immigrants has been more or less emotionally demanding.

The emotional impact was noted, for example, in the intervention carried out with the unaccompanied foreign minors who participated in PREMECE, especially when knowing their family context, their experiences or risks taken during their migratory journey, and the lack of protection in which they find themselves. As a strategy to deal with the emotional impact that could be caused to the minors, the PREMECE program had a psychologist in the intervention team who offered them emotional containment spaces. With regard to the emotional impact generated in the research team, it is worth mentioning the use of the field diary as an instrument to record the frustration, anger, or powerlessness of the street intervention team. As an example, I would like to mention one of the occasions when the field diary was a personal tool for coping with the emotional impact. During one of the visits we made as a research team to Ceuta, we went with the Drari team on their round of interventions with unaccompanied foreign minors in street situation. Suddenly one of them appeared screaming and told us that one of his friends had lost consciousness and was lying on the ground. Seeing this boy unconscious, in the street, at night and alone, was one of the most difficult experiences I have had as a researcher. We called an ambulance and one of the Drari educators accompanied the boy to the emergency room. When I got back to the hotel that night, I remember sitting down and writing down my feelings. At that moment, the field diary served as a support to vent my indignation and powerlessness in the face of a situation like the one I had experienced that night.

Another strategy to deal with the emotional strain is to have moments of decompression between the research team. This strategy was particularly useful in the case of JEPRAN. As mentioned above, in this project we conducted interviews with young people in prison. Hearing the harsh stories of many of them, or in the case of foreigners, the characteristics of their migratory journey, is particularly emotionally powerful. For this reason, we established a dynamic of sharing our impressions of the interviews we conducted as soon as we returned from the prison. In this way, we

were able to relieve ourselves emotionally. In these sessions, each researcher individually commented on how he or she had felt with the young people in prison. This exchange lasted for about an hour, sometimes longer depending on the severity of the stories told that day. The most common emotions were outrage, sadness, and powerlessness.

6 Closing Remarks

The nature of the subjects of criminological research poses several practical and methodological challenges that are present throughout the research process. These challenges take on a particular nuance when it comes to migrant populations, due to their heterogeneity and other characteristics that make them a difficult population to reach. The most common methodological limitations with migrant populations in criminological research are related to different aspects. Firstly, the ease with which they can be located is due to the suspicion that the criminal justice system or immigration officials may arouse in certain groups of migrants, such as those in an irregular situation.

Second, the practical challenges of fieldwork are also relevant to criminological research with migrants. In this context, the gatekeeper is particularly important as a figure who provides access to this population. Similarly, the piloting and data collection phases are important for identifying strategies to create an empathic environment for the interaction between researcher and migrant, where the role adopted by the researcher is also influential.

Third, there are also methodological challenges related to the selection, design, and application of research techniques and strategies. The main difficulties relate to the construction of the sampling frame and the types of sampling used to locate immigrants. In terms of research strategies, the literature highlights the advantages of those of a quantitative nature, such as the self-report questionnaire, as well as those of a qualitative nature, such as participant observation and field diary recording. However, the literature highlights the virtues of methodological triangulation as a strategy for approaching the immigrant population more accurately from a criminological perspective.

Fourth is dealing with sensitive issues and their ethical implications. The researcher needs to be aware that the cultural context of the migrant person may influence what is or is not considered sensitive. It is therefore recommended that the researcher familiarizes him/herself with the characteristics and cultural patterns of the immigrant community he/she intends to approach. This is also related to the ethical dimension of research, which emphasizes the researcher's obligation to inform the participant about the aims of the study, the potential risks that may arise from it, and the strategies adopted to avoid or minimize them.

Finally, OCSPI's research experience with different groups of migrant populations has made it possible to illustrate the different nuances of practical and ethical implications. The alternatives adopted by the OCSPI team can serve as an example

to rethink the practical and ethical challenges that can arise in criminological research with migrants. It is necessary to continue discussing the importance of these experiences of criminological research with migrants, to make them visible, and to propose alternatives that could help to overcome these challenges while respecting ethical principles and the participants during the research.

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Chapter 11

Researching the Roma in Criminology and Legal Studies: Experiences from Urban and Rural Participant Observation, Interviews, and Surveys



Lorena Molnar  and Marc H. Vallés 

1 The Roma: Definitions and Delimitations

The Roma are an ethnic group from India who arrived on the European continent in approximately the thirteenth century (Grellmann & Vali, cited in Fonseca, 1995/2018; Martínez-Cruz et al., 2016). It is notable that they are far from being homogenous; on the contrary, they constitute multiple subgroups and are classified in many ways: *Roma*, *Sinti*, *Kale*, *Manus*, *Travellers*, *Dom*, *Lom*, *Kelderash*, *Lovari*, *Gurbeti*, *Churari*, *Ursari*, etc. (for more details, see Council of Europe: Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues, 2012; Hancock, 1997). “Roma” is the umbrella term the Council of Europe uses to encompass this minority, which is estimated to be the largest in Europe. Today, the Roma are European nationals who possess the citizenship of a European country.

The Roma have been an overstudied, but also understudied group (Fraser, 1995; Lipphardt et al., 2021; Powell & Lever, 2017). In the nineteenth century, criminologists played a role in promoting Roma’s stigmatization, including such scholars as the Italian phrenologist Lombroso (1887/2006) and the Spanish scholars Rafael Salillas y Panzano, Jerónimo Montes, and Bernaldo de Quiros, all of whom claimed that the Roma were a criminal race (Rothea, 2007). The so-called social hygienists also studied them during the National–Socialist German regime in World War II. These studies addressed, in a pseudo-scientific (and highly unethical) way, the inherent *deviant* characteristics that this group supposedly possess. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that scholars began to focus on their disadvantages and the violation of their rights (see Villareal & Wagman, 2001; European

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Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017). Ethical concerns about studying the Roma have naturally been raised, notably with respect to this group's discrimination and stigmatization (Lipphardt et al., 2021).

Based on Molnar's (2021) narrative review of studies published from 1997 to 2020, criminological research focused largely on Roma's victimization. The most relevant topics were intimate partner violence (Dan & Banu, 2018; Hasdeu, 2007; Kozubik et al., 2020; Tokuç et al., 2010; Vrăbiescu, 2019), domestic violence (Oliván Gonzalvo, 2004; Velentza, 2020), hate crimes (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017; Greenfields & Rogers, 2020; James, 2014; Wallengren, 2020; Wallengren et al., 2019; Wallengren & Mellgren, 2018), or organized criminal networks (Campistol et al., 2014; Gavra & Tudor, 2015; Vidra et al., 2018). These studies adopted primarily qualitative methods: (i) analyses of archives; (ii) studies of judicial sentencing; (iii) press analyses; (iv) interviews, and (v) participant observations. This over-representation of qualitative studies is certainly related to the methodological challenges that quantitative studies face, i.e., the lack of a public register of Roma individuals and the strong stigma that the Roma suffer, such that some avoid disclosing their ethnicity because of fear of prejudice and discrimination. The exception to this is the EU-MIDIS project, which applied alternative sampling methods, such as *random route sampling* (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017). We discuss these studies in more detail in the following sections.

In this chapter, we address the methodological and ethical aspects of two field studies in criminology and socio-legal studies with and among the Romanian Roma, in both Switzerland and Romania, that we conducted for 1 year and 4 years, respectively (for more details, see Molnar & Aebi, 2021a, b; Vallés, 2019; Vallés & Nafstad, 2020). In our research, we studied these Roma groups' discrimination, power relationships, victimization, and offending. At the time of the studies, we were both beginning our research career, and therefore, we hope that this chapter will help other early career researchers address the methodological and ethical issues that may emerge in the course of their studies.

2 Fieldwork Among and with the Roma

We conducted several years of research and interventions with and among groups of Roma in both urban and rural settings. Marc spent 3 years traveling from Spain to rural Romania for a total of 9 months over the course of 3 years, while Lorena traveled between two Swiss cities, each with approximately 200,000 inhabitants, on a weekly basis for approximately 1 year. She conducted her fieldwork in these cities, where the migrant Roma constitutes a small fraction, the number of which the public authorities do not know. Marc's ethnography was conducted in a small Romanian village of 2280 inhabitants composed of 82% non-Roma and 18% Roma *Spoitor*. There, the locals knew each other and maintained relationships in everyday life. We used participant observations and ethnography, surveys, and interviews in our studies, the details of which are related below.

2.1 *Participant Observations and Ethnography*

We both depended upon gatekeepers of Roma and non-Roma—a *Gadje* in Romani language—origins who introduced us to the groups and assured them that we were trustworthy. Lorena’s fieldwork was also facilitated by the fact that, 1 year before her study began, she was a social worker who supported sex workers and was coordinating a project about male sex work. In this context, she intervened with these sex workers among the Roma by being “in the field” and offering prophylactic material (condoms, gel, flyers with information about the way to prevent sexually transmitted infections, etc.), health prevention workshops with both men and women, and counseling. Thanks to a Romanian local *Gadje* whom he knew personally beforehand through his network of acquaintances, Marc was able to access Roma informants from the rural commune of Gradistea who belong to the *Spoitor* subgroup.

Both the social workers and the Roma population accepted our projects well. In both studies, the snowball sampling technique (Patton, 2002) was essential; i.e., the gatekeeper gave access to the first informants, who then provided access to other participants who did the same by mobilizing their network of acquaintances.

Nevertheless, it is notable that despite our experience, accessing the field is one of the most difficult tasks when conducting criminological and socio-legal research among the Roma. The population can be accessed directly through personal contacts with members of the community or through the proxy of an NGO or other type of institution, but many obstacles arise during the journey. Participants may simply reject the researcher’s presence among their group, or NGOs can refuse to help the scholars access the field. In this case, NGOs may fear that the study will stigmatize their population if a scientist discovers (and publishes a study about) such phenomena as domestic violence, forced marriages, or trafficking in human beings. Another reason for being denied access to the field is related and other events that may converge in time, such as political developments, poor practices of other actors, such as the police, or NGOs’ lack of resources (see the example in Wallengren, 2020). In addition, it is not rare for the researcher, particularly if not Roma, to receive criticism from the non-Roma population as well for even “daring” to study the Roma. See the interesting example in the ethnography of Iulia Hasdeu, a Romanian Swiss researcher who conducted an ethnography with the Roma in Romanian villages.

On the other side of the interethnic border, namely the *Gadje* side, the terrain was not easier. My relationship with the authorities in Cordeni, the municipality that runs Căleni, has been very tense. Their attitude towards me, as a person interested in the life of the Roma, was contempt and almost open cynical rejection: “But what do you want? To educate them? But they are savages, they will never civilise.” (Hasdeu, 2007, p. 45)

In Marc’s case, despite his acceptance on the part of the Roma group, the reaction from non-Roma was like Hasdeu’s experience. The non-Roma in the locality where he did the fieldwork did not understand how a foreigner could be interested in the local Roma and not in them.

Last night I went out for refreshments at the village bar where youngsters and the elderly gather to drink and talk about day-to-day affairs. Laughing, the non-Roma reproached me for being interested in the *Spoitori* with phrases like: “Why do you study them and not us? We are more interesting, we have history and culture, they have nothing interesting to tell” or “Is this what you do at the University of Spain? Do you study the Roma? If you want them so much, you can take them all there.” (Marc’s fieldwork journal, 2016)

In general, the Roma have high intra-group cohesion but reject *Gadje’s* world (Fraser, 1995). From our experiences, there is some truth in these affirmations, but they do not mean that being a non-Roma researcher is an insurmountable challenge. As is the case with other “insider” researchers (Wallengren, 2020), Lorena’s ethnic background is Romanian Roma, and she is a native Romanian (but not a native Romani speaker—the Roma’s language). This fact naturally facilitated her interactions with the participants who are also native Romanian and, in general, did not mind using the Romanian language rather than Romani. Nevertheless, one can have a Roma background, but perhaps not come from the same subgroup and therefore not share the same experiences and cosmovision (Wallengren, 2020).

In addition, Marc’s experience showed that being a foreign non-Roma researcher can have certain disadvantages, for example, the need to learn a new language, but even more important, the distrust generated by the presence of a stranger with whom one does not share ethnic, national, and local identity. This situation can be aggravated when the informant belongs to an ethnic or social minority whose history and present are marked by discrimination in all its possible ways (see Vallés, 2019). However, that same disadvantage, as in this case, can serve in favor of the foreign researcher. Following Simmel (1950, p. 403), the foreigner who is not associated radically with the group s/he approaches, “... often receives the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person.” In this case, the socio-cultural and geographic distance between the researcher and the local informants allowed the participants to feel more comfortable and confident in explaining certain private matters that they would not explain in front of other local Roma because of fear or embarrassment.

I remember when in 2016 I went to interview Triana and she gave me her national ID card thinking that I was a Romanian government agent coming to collect her data because she had heard on the radio that they wanted to deport Roma back to Transnistria. Now every time we meet, she wants to talk to me about her issues because she says that unlike the rest of the neighbours (Roma and non-Roma), I don’t judge her. (Marc’s fieldwork journal, 2018)

During the participant observations, we “accompanied” the Roma in their daily life. For instance, we went to the places where they gathered, offered assistance when possible, interacted, and asked questions, but also just remained in the background and waited to avoid being perceived as too “pushy.” The assistance that we offered was filling out administrative forms written in French for them, helping their children with their homework, and helping with some household chores. A sign of the group’s acceptance of us is that we were invited to celebrate Easter together, when we ate, drank, and danced with our study population.

We avoided taking notes during the observations, as our main objective was to bond with our interviewees, rather than gather information *per se*. Nevertheless, once the observation was over, we wrote detailed notes in our fieldwork journal. We note that this activity should not be underestimated, as creating a research journal of thorough notes of the events and interactions we had during the observations is a time-consuming and mentally taxing activity.

2.2 Surveys

In addition to the participant observations, Lorena administered an adapted version of the third *International Self-Reported Delinquency Study* (ISRD-3) survey and gathered the responses of 27 young Roma from 12 to 25 years old. Nevertheless, these types of questionnaires, which target an international sample, are not adapted to ethnic minorities (Rodríguez et al., 2015). Thus, the position of “insider” helped in revising it. Lorena adapted the questionnaire herself, following the advice of two supervisors with a strong background in research methods. It was pretested as well with several members of the Roma community and the social workers from the NGOs. We designed the questionnaire after 5 months of participant observation. The adapted questionnaire may be found online (Molnar and Aebi, 2021a, b). Still, it should be pointed out that researchers may need to adapt the questionnaire to each Roma population, as they are locally dependent. For instance, Wallengren (2020) did not include topics such as education, family, or children in his questionnaire because his participants feared further stigmatization. However, this was neither our case nor what the social workers advised.

Once the questionnaire was approved, it was transferred to the online survey platform LimeSurvey and accessed via smartphone. Therefore, the surveys were *Computer-Assisted-Personal Interviews* (CAPI) that the interviewer planned to administer and conduct face-to-face. The CAPI technique has been recommended for populations who have low levels of literacy (Killias et al., 2019). During the interviews, the participants could elaborate as much as they wished when they answered the questions. The duration of the interviews varied from 20 minutes to 2 hours. Most participants elaborated on their answers, and they were detailed in the fieldwork journal.

The target population was Roma between 12 and 25 years of age, six of whom were minors. In all instances, Lorena asked for their consent verbally and then their parents. It took approximately 6 months to recruit just 27 participants. The population of youngsters was, perhaps, less interested in participating than the elderly, and they were also much more “nomadic,” in the sense that most of them spent some time in Switzerland and returned to Romania thereafter.

For five years they had been coming to Switzerland illegally and when they earned enough money, they left for Romania. She used to say: “If in one or two weeks I have my wallet full of money, I’ll go home.” (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, 2018)

Long periods of waiting were required to find the right moment to introduce the questionnaire. Although Lorena has no statistics on this, note that, even though the participation rate was rather high, she failed to recruit participants several times.

I went to this young person with the intention of recruiting him for conducting the questionnaire, but I could see that he was not too eager to discuss. I asked him: “Have you seen [the Roma social worker]?” He looked at me without moving, took off one of the headphones and said “No.” I stayed next to him for five minutes smoking a cigarette, but he didn’t say anything to me, didn’t move, it was like I wasn’t there. (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, 2018)

Most of the questionnaires were administered in cafés, where participants were recompensed with a beverage. Lorena’s research protocol stipulated that the interview should begin by discussing the “Information and Consent Form,” which was recommended highly during her university lectures, and that she prepared with much care and translated into Romanian. While this document is intended to increase participants’ trust, she had the impression that it had the opposite effect on the interviewees. The latter were not familiar with such documents and perceived that they were “bizarre” in the best case, but also suspicious. Moreover, some of the participants were illiterate and ergo unable to read, and in these cases, they needed to trust that what was read to them was accurate. She read the document loudly in Romanian and told them that they could sign it and keep their copy with my contact data, but that they did not need to provide their name. Nonetheless, it was very difficult to obtain consent from hard-to-reach non-Western populations.

I explained the information and consent form to him, but I found it very difficult to do so. He didn’t understand the purpose of it and the most adequate technique I found to explain it to him was that the university obliged me to do it to respect the person and so that he had a guarantee that I would ensure his confidentiality. I tried to talk about ethics, but he looked at me as if I were a stranger, so I couldn’t find a better solution. (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, 2018)

2.3 Interviews

In Marc’s case, participant observations were combined with interviews, as the latter allow for an in-depth study of what was witnessed during the fieldwork (Roca i Girona, 2010). In the interviews, he sought the maximum variation in narrative content, experiences, perspectives, and plurality of roles within the same group to reflect the greatest diversity in the reference population in relation to the topic of study and, at the same time, to find commonalities within the same group studied (Sanmartín, 2003; Olabuénaga, 2012; Flick, 2015). Therefore, the interviews ended when further observations no longer provided new information because of saturation and redundancy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Marc conducted a total of 28 with Roma *Spoitor* (15 women and 13 men) and 19 interviews with non-Roma (6 women and 13 men), between 17 and 73 years of age. The interviewees were informed that pseudonyms would be used to ensure their anonymity and were asked for their consent to record the interviews. Although they

were offered a written document in Romanian to give their consent, in the case of the Roma this was recorded verbally, because similar to in Lorena's case, they preferred not to sign any kind of document, claiming that they could not read or write.

The interviews were semi-structured, in that they contained a pre-established script with open questions and a list of content to be addressed that offered the interviewees' freedom to express themselves on other issues without being interrupted (Roca i Girona, 2010). This type of interview was very useful, as it allowed us to learn about crucial aspects of the interviewees' culture that the researcher himself had not foreseen in his script of questions.

Most interviewees usually answer the same about their situation during Ceausescu's communist government. However, Tica has told me about how her family used to meet with other *Spoitori* families from other localities to trade oxen competitively, where the honour of the male traders also came into play. This opens up a possible avenue for research on the circulation of goods and services based on negative reciprocity between families from different territorial bands. (Marc's fieldwork journal, 2017)

Just as researchers expect participants to provide them with certain types of data, interviewees may expect to be rewarded (Ferrándiz, 2011). Therefore, Marc's interviewees were compensated with goods of their choice, such as tobacco, soft drinks, or snacks. Although the interviewees did not request this compensation expressly most of the time, on one occasion an interviewee requested it repeatedly—an elderly and respected member of his community who was aware that his word was precious, and considered that he was a “bearer of the absolute truth of his culture.”

The interview with Roger, one of the most respected elders, did not go as smoothly as with the other interviewees. Every two or three questions he would look at his cell phone checking the time and, on some occasions, he would say that maybe he had to leave because his time was precious. Despite offering a soft drink and snacks from the beginning, after a while he asked me: “Aren't you going to give me more cigarettes? Every so often he would ask me for more cigarettes, which he would keep in the front pocket of his shirt.” (Marc's fieldwork journal, 2018)

The interviews were individual and generally took place in the garden of the house where Marc was staying, except for two occasions in which they were conducted in two Roma women's houses. On both occasions, the men in the family joined the interview and took control of the answers, relegating the women to the background. This phenomenon had both a negative and positive effect on the research. On the one hand, the purpose of the interview was lost, but, on the other, this situation allowed the power relationships based on gender to be observed, a crucial discovery in the research. These relationships were corroborated not only by the women's limited ability to participate in the interviews, but also because of the contrast between the answers that women provided when men were present and their responses when they were alone, e.g., views on arranged marriage.

Today I interviewed Pitrica again. This time the interview was in the garden of my residence, as last week I was unable to interview her properly at her home because her husband and children took control of the answers. Some of her answers varied considerably. For example, the other day (being with her family) she seemed to agree that arranged marriages between minors was something that had to be done because their custom says so. Instead,

today she was in tears explaining that she does not want her 13-year-old daughter to marry so young because she would prefer that she finish high school and then she chooses whom to marry. (Marc's fieldwork journal, 2019)

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, when the occasion arose, informal interviews were conducted as well, i.e., spontaneous conversations that were held fortuitously and without a pre-established script (D'Argemir et al., 2010). Normally, these were conducted in places of leisure, such as in the main cafeteria of the village or on park benches where they usually meet and eat sunflower seeds after work.

3 Methodological Considerations

There are several methodological considerations that play a fundamental role in our studies' validity and reliability. First, an instrument is valid if it measures a phenomenon efficiently and is reliable if, when used on repeated occasions, one always obtains the same outcome, regardless of who uses it (Aebi, 2006). First, the researcher's ethnic background plays a role in the reliability of research with Roma. See, for example, Wallengren's experience with the Swedish Roma:

There were study participants who told me that they would not have participated if a non-Roma had conducted the study. However, a couple of study participants told me that they had participated in other research projects earlier but that they, in these instances, had lied to the non-Roma researchers. The reason for this, I was told, was that the participant was not willing to participate in a study, but felt forced to do so because of the need of the communities to market themselves. Some also argued that they had chosen to participate in research as a way of tricking the non-Roma researcher and "having fun at their expense." For these study participants, the goal was to give the researcher incorrect and "absurd" information so that later they could talk to other Roma about how easily tricked and naive the researcher was. (Wallengren, 2020, p. 11)

The interviewer's gender plays a role in a study's reliability as well (Wilkins, 1999). If the researcher is a woman, it is likely that men will become flirtatious, and women, particularly spouses, jealous. If the researcher is a man, it is possible that women will feel intimidated and the Roma men suspicious if the interview took place individually (Wallengren, 2020). As Lorena is a woman in her 20s, there were many occasions when she was complimented for her physical appearance and asked whether she wanted to marry some of the young men. The manner in which we address these interactions is highly personal, but crucial. It was vital for her to maintain a professional image to prevent losing credibility and also fusing roles. Therefore, when someone asked her to be their "girlfriend," she would respond that she was not there to flirt with anyone, but to work. The community appeared to understand this message rapidly and these flirtatious interactions stopped after several months of observation.

In general, there was an atmosphere of respect—everyone greeted each other, and everyone shook my hand (they already knew me, but not too well either). There were some young people who tried to seduce me, but I was quickly defended by the older men. "Leave the

lady alone, can't you see she's here for work?," the older men would say to the younger ones. (Lorena's fieldwork journal, 2018)

In Marc's case, despite being a man, he had no problems arranging interviews with Roma women in the private garden of his residence, a fact that did not provoke jealousy on the part of their husbands either. First, most of the Roma *Spoitori* informants appreciated the fact that a non-Roma foreigner was curious about their culture, something really surprising for a community that suffers daily discrimination and contempt from the *Gadje* population. Secondly, it could also benefit the endogamous conception and marriage practice because the informants shared a subgroup, where an interethnic love or marriage relationship is practically inconceivable because of identity, cultural, and social issues.

We marry our own because that is how it has always been done, neither with other Gypsy nor with Romanians, only between *Spoitori* [...] Only those Roma who have been Romanianized ("converted" to Romanians) and have left the village to move to the big city and marry the *Gadjes*. What Romanian is going to look at a *Spoitori*? We are too different, not only in customs. No Romanian would want to be with a *Spoitori* because we have no money, no school education. For them we are crows, fools, they only want us to work when they need us. (Excerpt from an interview with a *Spoitor* man)

Moreover, a researcher's sexual orientation or identity can also affect the recruitment of participants and even prevent their entrance to the field or determine their exit. As Wallengren reported: "Some of the study participants also questioned the fact that I was unmarried and childless. Because of my involvement in the PRIDE parade, being single and not having any children, some individuals involved in the study asked me if I was gay and told me that if I was, they would not like to participate in the study" (Wallengren, p. 11).

The correct choice of the interview or survey location is fundamental to maintaining reliability, but is a challenging task. This is because the Roma population tends to prefer to be outdoors in the urban context, and in this case, the participants were unwilling to plan appointments. Conversely, among those who agreed to schedule the interview, most did not show for the latter. Moreover, external actors may restrict the choice of the interview location. For example, several Romanian Roma who were staying in Switzerland were forbidden to enter coffee shops or restaurants because some incidents had taken place there in the past. If the interviewer is unaware of these details, which was our case, it can create a certain amount of tension. Conversely, in the rural context, the interviews were conducted behind closed doors, most of the time in the garden of the researcher's residence. In fact, the participants preferred the interviews to be conducted in private and not in public, claiming on several occasions that in the village everyone knows each other, and everyone wants to pry into each other's lives. Thus, an intimate and private space in a small rural town was the best location, as it allowed the interviewees to feel free to express their opinions without fear of rumors and gossip, which is a very powerful mechanism of social control in that town. In addition, most of the time there were no problems arranging interviews. However, there were several occasions when the most respected elder in the community agreed to an interview, but did not

appear at the agreed time and place. Sometime later, the same elder arrived at the researcher's house unannounced and said he was ready for the interview, an act that we interpreted as a way to reaffirm his position of authority.

Today Gregorio unexpectedly showed up at my house [at] approximately 5 p.m. to be interviewed, after having failed to show up on three occasions. At first, he showed a haughty attitude. I had the feeling that he thought that he was doing me a big favour. He also gave me no explanation as to why he had not shown up the other times. (Marc's fieldwork journal, 2019)

Instruments should be adapted for the Roma, but it is possible as well that once designed, they need to be revisited. In Lorena's case, the questionnaire was designed initially for a population composed of late teenagers and young adults. Therefore, we addressed such sensitive issues as victimization, delinquency, and drug use. Then, after the questionnaire was designed, several young teenagers arrived in Switzerland (12–14 years old) and we considered it inappropriate to ask them these questions. In addition, instruments or techniques may need to be adapted not only because of the participants' ethnic background or age, but also their medical conditions, e.g., participants who stammer.

I couldn't ask her (a 14-year-old girl) about sex work and drug use. I hadn't thought about that beforehand in the surveys with children, but I just couldn't. I was afraid of influencing her, I didn't know what knowledge she had, and I thought it was safer not to ask than to be faced with a family argument because I explained to her what prostitution is. (Lorena's fieldwork journal, 2018)

The respondents' cosmovision influences the way they provide "general answers" that may differ from a Westerner's point of view. Therefore, follow-up questions and clarifications are necessary to maintain the validity of the research. See the example below:

I asked him if he had been in Switzerland for a long time and he said, "Yes, very long!" I asked him for an exact number, and, to my surprise, he said, "Almost three months." (Lorena's fieldwork journal, October 2018)

Reliability can be ensured in several ways, first, by allowing the population to become familiar with the researcher for some time before one begins to ask questions in a more "standardized" way. In that respect, the Roma participants were curious about the researchers' life: how much they earn, who is their partner, where they live, where they go out, if they spend a lot of money in the grocery stores, etc. This must be considered to determine the role to adopt. In our case, we decided to share parts of our lives because we found that it helped build rapport and therefore, increased reliability. In addition, we triangulated sources to assess whether the participants had been honest. For instance, Aebi (2006) triangulated self-reported surveys with data from the criminal records of drug users who agreed to participate in a heroin prescription program. This study was conducted in the 2000s when the laws on data protection differed from those today, but it is an excellent example of triangulation in criminological research. We could not do this formally in our own research, but we conducted triangulation informally through discussion with other members of the groups, such as social workers. Without giving them any

information that was disclosed to us, we would pose questions about the members we interviewed beforehand. In addition, it is also feasible to identify signs of “trust” coming from the population study. For instance:

She showed me an origami book that she has, which she uses for inspiration for the flowers she makes. She asked me to keep it a secret from her because she didn’t want other people in the community to know what she does so she wouldn’t have any competition. (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, 2019)

4 Ethics and Emotions: Misunderstandings, Cosmovisions, and Boundaries

It is noteworthy that none of our studies were submitted to an ethics committee for approval due to the inexistence at that time of both the committee and the obligation to submit our research project to such an organ. Nevertheless, the reader should note that this might differ depending upon the country, university, and topic of study. From our experience, there are several ethical challenges that emerge when studying the Roma: their comprehension of what they are about to participate in, the researcher’s need to respect the participants’ cosmovision, and his/her role in the journey. With respect to the first, some potential participants do not, and may never, understand the meaning of “survey,” “interview,” “academia,” “university,” or “consent.” This is highly problematic given our ethical responsibility to obtain informed consent. We attempted to explain our profession as much as possible, but it was challenging for them to imagine what scientific research was about.

Second, the participants may live highly different lives from the researcher: Some respondents beg, others farm, others engage in sex work, and other are stay-at-home parents, or have customs that differ greatly from ours. Interviewees’ cosmovision—their worldview—can be troubling in some cases, and this is an ethical risk that researchers may face. For instance, our participants expressed conservative views about women’s role in society, early marriages, and pregnancies on the part of 14-year-old girls, as well as homophobic commentaries. This can be shocking for a liberal Westerner (the average social scientist), and one can feel the urge to “correct” the person; nevertheless, this is not our role. It is essential to respect and attempt to understand the participants’ cosmovision and adhere, at least in part, to their rules during participant observations or an ethnography. Nevertheless, we needed to state our position when faced with certain potentially illegal or dangerous situations. First, one Roma man asked Lorena once about the way in which one could bring a girl and “put her on the street” to make money for him, i.e., sexually exploit a woman. She was obliged to tell him that it is not possible to do such a thing because it is illegal. Second, one participant had harassed Marc for several weeks. The latter, who was under the influence of alcohol, chased him around the village aggressively asking for money and tobacco. As a consequence, the non-Roma neighbors wanted to react violently to make the man stop his behavior. Marc had to intervene to avoid a major confrontation and, rather than informing the police, he

preferred to discuss it with the most respected Roma man in the *Spoitori* community, who talked sense into the man and made him stop his behavior.

The Roma populations that we studied requested much assistance, and it is an ethical question to consider how much the researcher should help. They were not shy about coming to us and asking, “Would you help me also with a job?” “Can you help me to have one of these CVs?” “Can you give me 20 euros?” We did not give money on principle, because, first, we were students ourselves with no research funding, but also because we were afraid that this would be discovered and the participants would participate in the research only for the purpose of obtaining financial gain. Nevertheless, we always told them where to go to seek help.

With respect to the emotional effects the research can have on both the researcher and participants, these were related to several aspects in our studies. First, the researcher spends a great amount of time with the population observed, and it is sometimes difficult to maintain the necessary distance from the informants so that affective relationships do not corrupt the objectivity of the research. Staying too close to the informants, to the point of identifying with them, can leave a researcher who becomes a “native” unable to address the research questions critically or even generate a feeling of guilt if the results of the research conflict with the interests of the group or a segment of the group. To avoid this situation, it is necessary to maintain a balanced relationship between the researcher and the informants.

I need to take a break for a few days for self-criticism. At times I feel that I have a responsibility to defend the traditions of my Roma informants vis-à-vis the non-Roma population because I am aware of the discrimination they suffer daily and because I would like to break with Eurocentric canons. However, I do not want this feeling to lead me to romanticize certain cultural practices and lose the capacity for critical reflection and objectivity in the analysis of the data collected. (Marc’s fieldwork journal, 2017)

Second, it is common to feel strong emotions—sadness, fear, or a sense of being overwhelmed—when a researcher witnesses the harsh conditions some participants endure. Sometimes, one hears or even witnesses crude crime and crime-related stories. One example is the case of child marriages, where 13- and 14-year-olds marry for their parents’ convenience and are forced to drop out of secondary school.

Emotionally, it affects me to be in front of homeless people and in an enormous precariousness. It’s hard to talk about such private things and then tell them: “Thank you for your time and your trust” and then go home, continue with my structured life, with a higher economic comfort than his. I understand that I can’t do anything and that it’s not my fault, but it still affects me. (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, November 2018)

Local authorities, as far as I have been told, do not apply any kind of prevention or awareness-raising measures with respect to arranged child marriage, they only act *ex officio* if there are signs of domestic violence. It is painful to see how the Roma women I have interviewed reject this practice in silence and accept it in public under the male gaze. (Marc’s fieldwork journal, 2018)

When we got to the question of intimate partner violence, he told me that he had hit his girlfriend and I asked him how far he had got in hitting her. He told me: “To give you an example, the whore had cheated on me, and I hit her until I was calm and then I shaved her head.” He told me that this way the community could also see what she had done. (Lorena’s fieldwork journal, 2019)

Moreover, as a woman, it was difficult to see other women with so much less agency, who endured not only domestic violence, but simply held the status of a human of less value in the community. The following was a particularly emotional interaction that still has an effect on Lorena:

I would like to be like you, Lorena. A free person, not wearing a skirt anymore, giving up tradition and finding a new life. Look, you're Roma, but you wear pants, you don't care about anything, you're happy, you have a normal life. I have to wear this fucking skirt and be a Gypsy. And I'm tired of it. I would like to sleep in the street, to work, to have a normal life. (Lorena's fieldwork Journal, 2018)

Our manners to cope with strong emotions were (i) to write about our emotions in our fieldwork journal, (ii) to take a certain distance from our participants, e.g., take time off, (iii) to debrief with colleagues and friends as well as our partners who provided advice and understanding, and (iv) to carry on with our lives (e.g., practicing our hobbies).

4.1 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

Here, we summarize the lessons that we learned during the years that we conducted participant research with the Roma in Switzerland and Romania. First, it was necessary to communicate openly with the gatekeepers and the participants about the objectives of our research. Second, we had to protect our participants and the communities we studied. In that respect, one needs to be cautious with the methodology, as well as disseminate the results and limitations of our studies, i.e., generalization of findings, transparently and honestly. The instruments used must be adapted and pretested to be as valid as possible. In that respect, research groups should consider including a member with Roma ethnicity among their staff, or someone with the linguistic and cultural knowledge who can connect with the study population. The researcher should consider that the location and setting in which the interviews are conducted may be crucial to the results. For example, in the urban context, where impersonal relationships prevail, there are many alternatives of a relatively safe and intimate space for interviewees, for example, in any coffee shop. In contrast, in the rural context, where face-to-face relationships dominate, it is more difficult to find a location where interviewees feel that they can express their opinions freely without fear or embarrassment of being heard by others.

Third, it is necessary for researchers to create a roadmap to conduct the fieldwork properly. However, they should also be aware that they will not be able to follow this roadmap on some occasions for unforeseen reasons. Therefore, they must be able to find alternatives, adapt to changes, and re-plan certain aspects of the roadmap. For example, informants may not arrive to give an interview they scheduled, or the researcher may have to modify the interview question script in part when new information relevant to the research emerges that was not foreseen in the initial script.

Fourth, it is fundamental to reflect on their role as a researcher, for instance, whether one intends to introduce oneself as a Roma insider, a *Gadje* interested in the Roma, a *Gadje* with Roma connections, etc. In addition, we must consider how much of our life we are comfortable sharing and the implications of this act. It is also imperative to consider the potential influence of one's gender and even sexual orientation or identity on the fieldwork. Researchers may need to ask for the spouse's permission to conduct an interview with a woman, or perhaps conduct a survey in a group. All of these decisions affect the study's reliability and validity. For example, if one is interested in domestic violence, it would be unwise to conduct an interview with the spouses together. People may also flirt with the researcher or, conversely, mock him/her. We recommend not taking remarks personally and remaining professional, but accepting that sometimes we will feel strong emotions. The researcher must maintain a balanced relationship with informants. S/he must approach them and create a bond based on mutual trust, but also maintain a certain socio-affective distance to prevent emotions from interfering with the analysis of the data collected. In the same way, the researcher may be involved in a minor conflict with a member of the group observed and whenever possible should seek a solution to the problem to avoid aggravating the situation further. For example, it is preferable to turn to the leader or authority figure in the group in question to find a more effective and less burdensome solution than that which could be offered by *Gadje* law enforcement, for example.

Fifth, the researcher must be self-critical and question his/her own assumptions. Sometimes the same concept can have different meanings depending upon the researcher and the informants' cultural schemes, for example, the conception of the passage of time illustrated herein. Further, the researcher must be critical of the conceptual categories, sometimes romanticized or reductionist, offered by the general literature available on the aspects of a social or cultural group studied, as they do not coincide with the social reality sometimes, as for example, the category "nomadism."

To conclude, criminological and socio-legal research with and among the Roma can be a highly enriching journey during which the researcher needs to consider several aspects and may face different challenges. Although we recommend beginning with a thorough research plan in which the researcher defines his/her role, one needs to be flexible and able to adapt to different contexts and participants. In addition, the researcher should maintain an open mind with respect to other cosmologies and intellectual honesty to identify difficult emotions and maintain a certain neutrality throughout the research process. Finally, it is imperative to be critical of one's own data and aware of their limitations, which we recommend expressing transparently when the results are disseminated to avoid over-generalizations that could stigmatize the Roma.

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Part III
The Vulnerable

Chapter 12

Street Children, Criminological Research and Emotional Labour: Reflections from the Field



Sally Atkinson-Sheppard 

1 Street Children and Organised Crime

The chapter focuses specifically on street children's involvement in organised crime. The deliberations in this chapter reflect upon a 3-year empirical case study conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh, consisting of three phases (discussed in more detail below). The 'stars' of the study were 22 street children. The chapter focuses on the emotional labour required to engage this 'hard-to-reach' and marginalised group and the process of developing emotional connections at various stages of the research process. The chapter considers the importance of a case study methodology and reflects upon the stages of research, which led up to the involvement of the street children, and the importance of this process in building reflexive methodologies and emotional labour. I also reflect upon my own positionality, specifically focused on developing a more nuanced understanding of the victim–offender dichotomy, rooted within wider notions of constructions of childhood and coloniality.

The methodology was embedded within ethnography. This method was chosen because of the following reasons. First, since the 1920s, scholars have demonstrated the applicability of ethnography to studies of gangs and organised crime. The Chicago School developed some of the first research into gangs and based their findings on zonal mapping of the city but also life history interviews and participant observation (i.e. Thrasher, 1927). In addition, the most innovative and explanatory gang research that followed has also, although not exclusively, followed similar methodologies (Bourgois, 2003; Gunst, 1995).

Extant research that considers street children is also often based on ethnography, particularly studies that consider the relationship between street children and

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violence. Studies into the subculture of street children, such as Beazley's (2003) research in Indonesia, utilised participant observation, focus group discussion and qualitative interviews as well as employing strategies to specifically engage the young people (i.e. drawing and role-play).

One of the few studies that considers the intersection between street children and gangs is Heinonen's (2011) research in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). This six-year study included observation and ethnographic interviewing. Heinonen built and maintained relationships with the street children involved in her study, the observations of which are underpinned by ethnographic methodology and reflexivity. Thus, ethnography is a valid method for exploring gangs and issues affecting street children. Furthermore, as this was one of the first studies to consider street children's involvement in organised crime in Bangladesh, exploratory methods were imperative, because of this, an ethnographic case study was utilised for this study.

2 Phases of the Fieldwork

The study employed an ethnographic case study approach to explore street children's involvement in Bangladeshi organised crime. The research considered the views and experiences of 22 children from the streets and slums, associated with an NGO that provides them with housing, support and education. The study also included data drawn from interviews with 80 criminal justice practitioners, NGO workers and community members and over three years of participant observation of the Bangladesh criminal justice system and wider society.

There were three main phases of the study (all of which obtained ethical approval from King's College London ethics board). The first, phase 1, included over 3 years of participant observation. This observation occurred while I lived and worked in Dhaka and was supported by my employment at an international NGO that specialises in prison and police reform; further details of this organisation and participants cannot be provided as it would enable the organisation to be easily recognised. There were many benefits to this phase of the study, largely related to my positionality as a foreigner in Bangladesh. Phase 1 supported my understanding of the social, political, cultural and historical context to the study and facilitated the development of numerous connections, many of which provided access to research participants, including the street children.

The second phase of the study included 80 interviews with adult practitioners (38 semi-structured and 42 unstructured) and two focus groups, the first with six participants and the second with five. The participants were wide-ranging but specifically chosen for inclusion in the study based on their prior knowledge of this subject area and thus included police officers, senior prison officers, military security officers, paralegals, NGO workers, police and prison reform workers, journalists and community members. These interviews enabled me to focus on specific issues of crime and violence and develop an understanding of the 'landscape' of organised crime in Bangladesh.

Phase 3 of the study was an embedded case study with 22 street children and the organisation where they resided—a national NGO, which supports street children by providing them with refuge from the streets and access to housing and education. Initial access was gained via the help of ‘local gatekeepers’; colleagues in Bangladesh advised me to speak to the director of the NGO, who then agreed to support the study. This phase of the study occurred over a year-long period. All of the children involved in the study lived at the organisation from Sunday to Thursday (the Bengali working week) and returned to the streets or slums at the weekends. Several of the children were orphans and thus lived at the organisation on a full-time basis. The children were aged 8–15; there were 12 boys and 10 girls.

Phase 3 of the study consisted of several stages. The first encompassed participant observation, this observation occurred during my weekly visits to the organisation and supported building connections, trust and rapport. I then carried out five workshops specifically focused on issues related to crime and violence. The workshops were designed to reflect best practice in relation to research involving street children (i.e. Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003; Conticini, 2005; Punch, 2002a; Punch, 2002b). They were interactive, young person led and included drawing (discussed by many scholars to be an effective way to engage children in research, i.e. Merriman & Guerin, 2006), role play and games (methods advocated by a number of scholars, i.e. Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003). The workshops were used to desensitise issues of crime and violence and acted as a precursor to semi-structured group interviews. The topics covered in the workshops included the following: What is crime; young people and the police; young people and work; drug and substance misuse and the United Kingdom, London and gangs.

The final stage of the embedded case study included eight semi-structured group interviews with the children. It was during these interviews that we discussed their perceptions of street children’s involvement in organised crime. The practice of group interviews with children helps to overcome issues of ‘adult centrality’ (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Kaarina, 2011) and enables the research to be ‘young-person led’. For example, the children were given the opportunity to discuss group interviews and choose which groups they would like to interview with. As Lewis (1992) argues, group interviews have various advantages, and they help children feel comfortable and confident and can encourage open debate. Gaining ethical approval for this study was (rightly) lengthy and intensive.

To support the process, I developed and implemented a specific ‘child protection policy’ agreed with the director of the organisation before the research began. This agreement stated that, should a disclosure occur, or if I felt the child posed a risk to themselves or others, I would discuss the issue with the director of the NGO, and we would work together to support the young person and others involved. This was particularly important given the wider context of child protection in Bangladesh. A ‘global North’ approach to a disclosure of risk or a criminal offence would usually involve a referral to social services or the police, and this is not necessarily viable in Bangladesh due to the lack of social services provision for young people but also because referring a street child to the police may put the child at increased risk (see Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021, for a more expansive discussion). The child protection

policy was not implemented within the study; however, it was an important component of the research to ensure that a robust process was in place to protect the children and uphold their rights as research participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the study. The research integrated a ‘no-name’ policy, participants (both the adults and children) were given a number a pseudonym and their original names or identifying information has never appeared in any publication. Consent (verbal and written) was obtained from each participant. It is important to note that as the children were under the age of 18 and the director of the NGO responsible for them during the week, she proposed and agreed to provide consent for their involvement in the study. It was not viable to contact the children’s parents in this instance, as many were orphans, and in other cases, the children only had distant relatives living in Dhaka (the location of the study and NGO). Thus, I followed the advice of the director of the organisation and we agreed that the children would provide individual consent and she would provide consent for the children overall.

A case study approach underpinned the three phases of research. As Yin (2014) argues, ‘a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident’ (p. 16). Case study methodologies have been utilised in similar studies around the world. For example, Varese (2010) employed a case study methodology to consider the movement and migration of mafias. In 2017, Wang developed similar methods to explore mafias in China, and Bowling’s (2010) ‘Policing the Caribbean’ engages observation, interviews and analysis of secondary sources to reflect upon the transnational nature of policing in the Caribbean. The benefits of case study methodology are wide-ranging and particularly relevant to this research due to the nature of the study—it was exploratory, and it explored a number of complex issues, including the relationship between street children, organised crime and the state. A process of triangulation underpinned the analysis, supported by the case study approach. Each phase of data was analysed before moving on to the next. A process of convergences and divergences underpinned this comparative analysis (Atkinson-Sheppard & Hayward, 2019). Themes arising from each phase of the data were compared, exploring similarities, differences and overarching themes.

3 Emotional Connections and Engaging in Emotional Labour

The study was fraught with emotional and ethical challenges. The topic, the context, the participants and the methodology required nuanced and careful planning, to reflect the need to manage emotional labour and tackle challenging ethical terrains. Emotional labour refers to ‘an explicit methodological tool to explore research experiences and the research process’ (Waters et al., 2020, p. 1). The process of

criminological research requires researchers to manage, control, restrict and exhibit emotions 'requiring the performance of emotional labour' (ibid. p. 2). As various scholars have argued, this process is both essential to a successful research project, likely embedded within a researcher's own positionality and time-consuming and complex (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Skilbeck & Payne, 2003).

Emotional labour is an analytical tool and is closely associated with gaining access, data collection and research facilitation (Carl, 2016). Despite this, the nuances of emotional labour remain marginalised in criminological discourse (Waters et al., 2020). The notion, however, the emotional labour, 'can act as that critical lens. A researcher's own personal values and identification will influence their performance of emotional labour, as will the characteristics of their participants, the research topic and the research environment more broadly' (Waters et al., 2020, p. 2). All of which affect the ways in which a researcher displays or withholds emotions, processes emotions and disengagement (ibid.).

This chapter considers 'emotion and emotional labour as explicit methodological and/or analytical tools to understand research and data' (Waters et al., 2020, p. 1) and reflects upon the complexity of this in light of the study in Bangladesh. These discussions focus on the following areas. First, how emotional labour intertwines with notions of authenticity and purpose and how this relates to the development of emotional and nuanced connections with participants, supportive of research access and facilitation. Second, the specific modes of emotional labour required to navigate challenging terrains including the topic in question: street children's involvement in organised crime. To do so, I reflect on my own positionality—and coloniality and how the latter effects affected my construction of childhood—and how the research challenged this notion and enabled me to move beyond to colonial constraints of a 'certain type' of childhood and into a domain of understanding which better reflects the realities of children's lives. The chapter then considers the emotional labour required to end the research and 'exit the field', questioning when and whether research really ends (Thorneycroft, 2020).

The section begins by reflecting on a 'fieldnote' I completed during my field research in Bangladesh. The fieldnote introduces some of the main themes of the research: exploitative child labour, endemic poverty, pervasive slums and my positionality as a foreign researcher conducting research in Asia.

I am standing on the 6th floor of a building overlooking Dhaka. The city rumbles on below me. Slums litter the landscape and sprawl over undefined areas. Buildings stretch up to the sky, their stability precarious. Space is a hard-fought concept. Traffic jams waste hours of precious time. The dense air makes your eyes smart; the atmosphere is hot and humid.

Noise never ceases in this city. Endless banging from throngs of building sites surround me. The air is filled with the noise of car horns, buses and rickshaw bells. The city is moving. On the street rickshaws bump into one another, buses career down roads, cars move though gaps which are strikingly small. A near accident is a possibility at every moment.

The colours are grey, light brown and yellow as the sun glistens through the smog. Concrete consumes my vision, yet people's clothes enliven the scene. Pinks of saris flash past, blue *lungis*¹ cover men's legs.

For three years I have immersed myself in this city and this country. It has been the location for my research, but it has also been much more. The city and its people have taught me more than I could ever imagine, of life and death, of joy and happiness and of pain and suffering. The eyes of my participants will stay with me forever. From the colleagues that have become my friends with their astute views on their nation to the police officers I met behind closed doors to protect their anonymity. But is it the street children that typify this research and it is the story of 22 young people that exemplify my arguments. Yet many others have added to my understanding, and will remain forever nameless, consumed back into the orifice of the city. These people are Dhaka's street children. They are the children who stand shoeless on street corners and grasp at my clothes as I walk along. They are the 'regulars' that work these streets on a daily basis. Their affiliation to older 'bosses' plain for anyone to see. Their office is my road. It is their eyes that will stay with me when I return home. They are the voiceless and nameless children who occupy this city, its sharp edges fracturing their childhood as each day passes (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019, p. 2).

3.1 *Emotional Labour and the Inception of the Study*

One of the first things that struck me on arriving in Dhaka was that I could see crime. Desperately vulnerable children would run up to my car window and beg for money, their feet shoeless and their clothes ragged. I would give the children money and watch them run across the road and put the money into the hands of men who stood in doorways sheltering from the sun. I never saw the children get anything in return; they would scurry back to the cars waiting at the traffic lights to begin working again. I also witnessed many instances of people, including children, giving money to police officers in what appeared to be acts of extortion. I started to ask questions. I wanted to know what was happening to these children; I wanted to explore who these men were and what role the police played. I wondered whether I was witnessing gang-related activity or something more organised. It soon became clear that I had a lot to learn about crime in Bangladesh; thus, I began this study to explore the relationship between street children and organised crime (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019, p. 16).

Observing these initial interactions on arriving in Bangladesh enabled me to develop a sense of purpose—one of the fundamental 'building blocks' of emotional labour. Witnessing these, very visual acts of exploitation motivated me to want to learn more; on an emotional level, this initiated a desire to complete the research study. In many ways, this process was supported by 'living there' (Nelken, 2004, p. 93). As Nelken (2004, p. 93) argues, there are various ways in which a foreign researcher can conduct a study, by being 'virtually there', 'researching there' or 'living there'. The researcher can conduct the study via virtual methods and by

¹Traditional Bengali dress.

engaging local experts, or they can ‘research there’ by visiting the country and conducting interviews while they are there (ibid.). However, Nelken advocates for ‘living there’, where the researcher becomes an ‘observing participant’ and an ‘inside–outsider’ (Nelken, 2004, p. 94) enabling the researcher to develop critical insight, contextual knowledge and be in a position to reflect on their participants’ potential bias and their own positionality. Living there is also closely intertwined with developing and engaging in emotional labour.

I began working as a consultant for an international development organisation (focusing on prison and police reform) soon after arriving in Dhaka. This employment aided my understanding of Bangladesh and facilitated my ‘emotional attachment’ to the country and its people. During this time, I met and worked with many Bangladeshi criminal justice practitioners, NGO workers, journalists, diplomats and community members. I began to learn about Bangladeshi culture from my colleagues, many of whom became friends, and by immersing myself in life in Bangladesh. The notion of local experts who inform research processes is well discussed within ethnographic research (Taylor, 2004), and this became an imperative research ‘tool’. I continually asked questions and learned about the culture, history and political context of Bangladesh from colleagues, friends and daily engagement with English-speaking newspapers. As the research progressed, I utilised my contacts and with their help continually focused and re-focused the parameters of the study. This also supported and developed my emotional attachment to the country, the longer I spent in Dhaka the more attached to the country I became. This both supported and hindered emotional labour, discussed as this chapter progresses.

3.2 Emotional Labour During the Research

The need to manage emotions, develop emotional connections and reflect on how this affected the research was an imperative and fundamental part of the research process. Emotional labour was an essential tool for gaining access and facilitating the research process. This was imperative at all stages of the data collection. In regard to phase 1, participant observation, developing emotional connections, and the performance of emotional labour were necessary to engage colleagues in the study in addition to our working relationships. This was further developed in phase 2, the interviews with criminal justice practitioners, and became heightened and more pertinent in phase 3, the embedded case study with the street children.

The need to perform emotional labour differed among each phase and with each research participant. There were, however, several notions that supported this process. The first relates to the development of a sense of purpose—to raise awareness of street children’s involvement in organised crime. Cunneen and Rowe (2014, p. 56) explain that axiology, ‘refers to the set of values, ethics and morality which underpin our research, including our ethical standpoint on the relationship of research to broader social or political goals’. In regard to the current study, the axiology related to raising awareness of street children’s involvement in organised

crime. This overarching aim then guided the overall study (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021). It was also closely related to developing a sense of purpose and authenticity, both of which aided the research; in many instances, my participants shared the same aim.

Developing a sense of purpose and authenticity was closely related to the development of emotional connections. Aligning my sense of purpose with this axiology generated connections with participants and supported the development of emotional labour—specifically relevant in a study such as which explored participants' experiences of sensitive and challenging topics. Furthermore, developing reflexive authenticity helps to develop culturally specific connections (discussed as this article progresses) and overcome issues related to positionality—in my case associated with my position as a British academic conducting research in Asia. There were also issues of gender that affected access and the development of building connections. In some instances, developing connections with women was easier as a female researcher and likely reflective of wider patriarchy that exists in Bangladeshi society. In addition, in some instances, I had to 'negotiate space' and develop assertive interviewing techniques when speaking to male participants (and as a way to challenge hierarchical social structures). Despite this, in many instances, it was the connections that I had with participants that supported the research access and process. This was particularly true with one of the participants, an adult human rights worker who had lived on the streets as a child and throughout the research shared incredibly sensitive and personal experiences, many of which he had not shared with others before. While conducting interviews with Sharif—not his real name—it was necessary to control my own emotions, while at the same time supporting him during disclosures of traumatic events and thus as Waters et al. (2020, p. 3) argue, 'requiring the performance of emotional labour'. To support this process and wider practices of emotional labour, I developed several mechanisms of 'individual support'; I utilised fieldnotes to write down and process my emotions, I also discussed the challenges of the research with my supervisor at the time and with a friend who was also a trained counsellor. All of which helped me to navigate this emotional and challenging terrain.

In general, I found the research to be incredibly challenging, particularly on an emotional level. In most cases, the interviews discussed crime, violence and exploitation of Bangladesh's most marginalised citizens. As the research progressed and the longer I lived in Dhaka, the more committed I became to the research and also to Bangladesh overall. There were instances in which I was close to tears during interviews, particularly when speaking to Sharif and hearing about his experiences as a child. There were other interviews that were equally arduous, and participants spoke about the victimisation they and their families faced, the realities of living in areas controlled by *mastaan* (organised crime) groups, and their frustration at the lack of governmental support to address the issue and widespread political violence and corruption.

The research with the street children was particularly difficult. I spent a year getting to know the children before commencing the research study. We spent time together, playing games, dancing and discussing Bangladesh. This was an

imperative process to build trust and rapport and because of this the children were not sceptical or suspicious of my visits to the NGO, from the very start I discussed the research overall and its aims, but I also explained that before we began, I wanted to get to know them first. This meant that when the research did commence the children felt comfortable to share their views with me and in many instances, on an emotional level this was incredibly challenging, largely because they knew so much about crime, violence and exploitation. The need to perform emotional labour (Waters et al., 2020) was particularly acute in these instances, the importance of not appearing shocked when the children drew pictures of murder or violence when they had been asked to 'draw crime'. Or when they disclosed information related to organ trafficking, led by mastaan groups or pervasive exploitation of children like them, embroiled in organised crime by their need to survive. A fieldnote written during phase 3 of the research explains further:

I question why I am here. I feel that I want to protect these children who are so unprotected. I feel that if I talk about their past, I may force them to think of things they don't want to think about. I am scared of what they might say. I am worried that I don't have time to get the answers. I worry that they don't know what I need them to tell me. Even though I know that they do.

I feel dishonest. Why am I avoiding the issue? I am scared to approach it. Am I scared of what I might find? Probably. These children already have a place in my heart; how will I cope if they tell me they were abused, and no one was there to protect them? How will I cope if they tell me that there are millions of children being abused with no one to help them? Even though I know that they will. How will I cope? How do they cope? How can this world be so wrong, yet so right for some?² (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019, p. 179)

There were many instances in which I struggled to 'leave the research behind'. It kept me awake at night. I often thought of the children and the struggles they faced in the evenings and at weekends, exacerbated by the many street children I got to know in the local area and who were not officially included within the research but supported my learning nonetheless. These children were often present at nearby markets, and I often observed them begging at street corners; because of the time I spent in Dhaka I would often speak to the children (as best I could in pidgin Bengali), buy them food and give them money. While doing so I would reflect on the themes arising from the data, of exploitation, labour, crime and violence and how this must also affect them, along with the many other daily struggles they faced. A sense of hopelessness often underpinned these interactions and plagued my thoughts for months—and years after the completion of the study.

Thorneycroft (2020) questions when and if research ever really ends. This was relevant to this study because although there was a clear completion time and a date when I left Dhaka the reality was, and still is, that I still think about the children's lives today. I also remain in contact with the NGO and several of the research participants, including Sharif. The results of the research, including the publication of a book that summarises the research findings, were shared with the children and wider research participants. The axiology of the research has also stayed with me

²Field note 37.

and has led to the development of several other studies, based in China and Nepal which consider similar issues. In addition, themes of labour as an explanatory factor for street children's involvement in organised crime have impacted upon research I am conducting in the UK and focused on 'county lines' (the movement of drugs from urban to rural areas) and which also includes the exploitation of vulnerable children. Thus, there is great merit in supporting researchers to consider the fluidity of boundaries and the flexibility and reality of 'completion' dates. Adherence to such dates may well, at least in some instances, limit the longer-term benefits of research and its potential impact.

4 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

The importance of developing emotional labour formed an imperative part of the research. It was necessary to engage in this form of labour for a variety of reasons: first, to become accustomed to and develop my own sense of understanding of the wider context to the research; second, as discussed, to support access and the facilitation of the research process; and third, to build and form emotional connections with my participants and to manage my own emotions and their emotions during the data collection. However, emotional labour is also closely related to positionality and the ability of a researcher to develop reflexivity widely discussed as an imperative part of any criminological study (Temple & Edwards, 2002), particularly relevant when the researcher is, like I was, a foreigner in the country in which the research occurs.

The need to engage in emotional labour was particularly relevant in regard to one of the key contributions of the study. I argue, based on this research, that street children who engage in organised crime should be conceptualised as 'illicit labourers' as opposed to offenders or even victims (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019). However, to arrive at this conclusion it was necessary for me to engage in a lengthy process of reflection, largely because, at first, I could only see the young people engaged in this study (and those like them) as victims. The process by which I came to understand the young people as labourers relates to the ways in which the children themselves discussed their roles in organised crime, demonstrating a move away from the polarising dichotomy of victim or offender status and towards a more comprehensive and reflective understanding of the realities of street children's lives.

The data illustrated labour as a key driver for involvement with the *mastaan* groups, this was based on the structure of these criminal groups, the hierarchies that exist among them and the need for street children to work to survive (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017, 2019). However, constraints of emotional positioning prevented me from seeing this. Rather, I could, as discussed, only consider the children as victims. This was illustrative of street children's status in Bangladeshi society, their marginalisation, the acute poverty they face and the realities of their lives. However, this too was embedded within my own positionality, closely associated with conceptualisations of childhood—and coloniality.

Dominant understandings of childhood largely derive from the global North and are ‘closely interwoven with the process of colonisation’ (Liebel, 2020, p. 1). ‘Western narratives of modernisation’ (Morrison, 2012, p. 3) denotes specific forms of childhood, related to education and play and associated with what children *should* or *should not* do (ibid.). However, the Western centrism that permeates this discourse leaves little room for understanding children who do not fit within these damaging hegemonic notions—including children like the ones discussed in this chapter and for whom education is unlikely and play is scarce and deeply embedded within their plight to survive on the streets.

On an emotional level, my own positionality as a British scholar affected the ways in which I was also to understand these children’s lives. The process to move away from solely considering the children as victims was a lengthy but important one and required sensitive and in-depth emotional questioning. In many ways, my desire to prioritise conceptualisations of victims was more reflective of my own childhood—and global North childhoods and associated assumptions. Emotional reflections enabled me to understand that I *wanted* to see the children as victims, likely associated with my own understanding of children, especially vulnerable children as innocent and in need of protection, deeply embedded in global North conceptualisations of children and childhood. Yet, the data clearly illustrated the complexity of the issue, the importance of considering the nuances of children’s involvement in crime and their victim status alongside their desire to make money to survive. A celebration of their entrepreneurial skills, assertiveness and imaginations—and a conceptualisation of labour which better reflected the realities of their lives.

The reality was that my own views on children’s involvement in organised crime were affected by the ways in which I had experienced childhood and the persuasive assumptions of children that permeate the Western society in which I grew up. This normative assumption for me was not the reality of these children’s lives. The notions of coloniality which Maldonado-Torres (2007, pp. 243–244) explains relate to ‘long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production’ as a pervasive mechanism of silencing ‘the other’ was apparent here, but it was only via emotional interrogation of my own positionality that I was able to see this, and thus move forward—and into a place of better understanding. The process for doing so was, as discussed, lengthy and, at times, painful. The nature of our own positionality is often difficult to ‘leave behind’ and perhaps particularly so, where there feels to be an ‘moral’ obligation to consider a population (in this case, children) in a certain way. Yet, the many months I spent unpicking these assumptions, and the interrogation of the data helped to develop my own understanding of these children’s lives and enabled me to move, at least to an extent, beyond the limitations of my own positionality. This alerts us to the damaging nature of coloniality on researcher’s positionality and the inadequacies that this leads to if not considered in nuanced depth. However, despite this, there was scant training available to me related to emotional interrogation/labour, something which various scholars discuss as an issue across the field of criminology (Fohring, 2020; Waters et al., 2020). Questioning

how we might develop these resources further to better equip researchers and support the development of research that moves beyond positionality and into an understanding of marginalised children's lives.

The research also supported my understanding of specific cultural modalities relevant to building connections and performing emotional labour. Any research project relies on the development of connections, and these connections are relevant between the researcher and the participants but also between the researcher and the many people who assist and facilitate research. There were nuances relevant to developing connections in Bangladesh, which relate to the specific cultural context in which this research occurred. For example, it was necessary to learn and reflect upon the 'relationality' (Liu, 2017) that underpins many Asian countries, including Bangladesh. In addition to this, notions of patronage and *adda* became 'building blocks' for developing connections and performing emotional labour and developing an awareness of each was an imperative part of developing a reflexive research process.

Lewis (2012) argues that 'patron-client relationships are a cornerstone of society in Bengal, combining political, economic and religious elements of social organization' (p. 156). Patron-client relationships are evident in many social interactions in the county, ranging from the job market, to housing, education and wider society. This means that patron-client relationships affected and facilitated the research in several ways. First, it was important to acknowledge this specific form of social nuance and work with this structure to support the development of emotional labour. For example, performance of a different form of emotional labour is required depending on whether the researcher is perceived to be the patron or client in a social interaction (and this differs according to each participant's level of patronage in wider society). For example, there was an element of patronage for those participants who were senior prison and police officers and while I did not necessarily inhibit the position of 'client' specifically nor was the interaction related to patronage, i.e. the transfer of services because of the presence of patronage in Bangladeshi society, adherence to social structures that mirror patron-client relationships was evident (and at times cause problematic encounters—see Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021 for more details). It took some time for me to appreciate the centrality of patronage in Bangladeshi society and the ways in which it is necessary to respond to this, in light of developing social connections and performing emotional labour.

An additional element related to 'adda' or 'informal chats', which occur in neighbourhoods (*parra addas*), at work and over *cha* (tea) (Mahmud, 2019). *Adda* is widely depicted in Bengali media and literature and forms an important part of Bangladeshi culture related to building and maintaining social connections (*ibid.*).

Adda formed a significant part of the research process and facilitated emotional labour. For example, in phase 2 of the study it quickly became apparent that engaging in *adda* was a key component to a success interview. This was based on several factors. First, engaging in *adda* enabled a quick sense or rapport to be built between the participant and I, this then supported the performance of emotional labour as I was able to ascertain information about the participant, likely unknown to me should *adda* not have occurred. This information is often related to the personal views of

the participant, their standpoint and views on Bangladesh politics and information related to their family and wider social networks. The latter was particularly important for developing an initial connection—and often a pre-cursor to the performance of emotional labour.

The importance of developing and understanding social nuances and ‘specific modalities of culture’ (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2021, p. 1) including *adda* and patronage cannot be underestimated for a study of this nature. The relationship between *adda*, patronage, developing connections and performing emotional labour is rarely discussed within criminological discourse, thus in many ways I developed my own reflexive responses to these cultural nuances. However, the importance of *adda*, patronage and emotional labour as research facilitators is imperative thus more focus in research methodology training to consider the specific nuances of cultural interactions but also how this relates to and affects the delivery of emotional labour should be prioritised.

5 Conclusion

The chapter considered a 3-year ethnographic case study in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which focused on street children’s involvement in organised crime. It reflected upon the emotional aspects of the study and the ways in which I performed emotional labour and the nuances of doing so at all stages of the research process. I reflected upon the importance of developing reflexive research methodologies, remaining focused on developing an understanding of the specific nuances of culture relevant to Bangladeshi society. I also considered my own positionality and how this related to notions of the victim–offender dichotomy and conceptualisations of the children involved in this study as labourers as opposed to criminals or even victims. For me, the process of understanding my desire to ‘see’ the children as victims as deeply embedded within global North constructions of childhood and thus coloniality provided one of the most emotionally challenging yet important parts of the research process.

Many scholars have discussed the importance of developing emotional connections, and the performance of emotional labour (Waters et al., 2020), also highlighting the marginalisation of this discourse in mainstream criminological discourse and methodological training (Fohring, 2020; Waters et al., 2020). My experience supports this viewpoint; in many instances, I felt ill-equipped to process and manage the emotional aspects of this study. More expansive methodological training that prioritises emotional labour and the embedded and damaging effects of coloniality would benefit researchers, participants and the delivery of reflexive, nuanced research that aims to centre an axiology that seeks to tackle social injustice, better protect vulnerable children and halt the spread of organised crime.

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Chapter 13

Research in Child and Adolescent Victimization: Incentives, Threats, and Challenges



Noemí Pereda 

1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodological and ethical issues regarding victimological research with children that we have conducted from the GREVIA group (Research Group in Child Victimization) at the University of Barcelona. Child and adolescent victimization is a problem of social concern, both due to its extent, with rates ranging from 12.7% for sexual abuse to 36.3% for emotional abuse across the world according to meta-analysis studies (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015), as well as its serious developmental effects, which can persist into adulthood and negatively affect multiple areas of the victim's life (Kendall-Tackett, 2003). Nevertheless, it is only recently that a solid theoretical framework has been proposed, under the name of “developmental victimology,” which aims to facilitate decision-making by researchers and professionals in the field of violence against children and adolescents based on the results of rigorous studies (Finkelhor, 2008).

This theoretical perspective proposes that the forms of victimization, their characteristics, and their consequences differ depending on whether they occur in one or another evolutionary stage. According to this theory, children face the same amount of victimization as adults do (such as conventional crimes or community violence), but, in turn, children are in a position of greater risk from the direct or indirect experience of many other victimizations by those close to them. This higher risk is mainly linked to the high level of dependency on their caregivers, their lack of autonomy, and also the social tolerance that has historically existed regarding violence against children. In addition, child victims are often characterized by high or total levels of unconsciousness regarding their own victimization, which makes them “ideal victims,” an aspect that will have important implications for the

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psychological and social consequences that may arise. Thus, children must be considered the most vulnerable age group in the victimological field, in terms of both violence and the negative effects derived from it.

The high percentage of child and adolescent victimization obtained in all the surveys applied around the world by different research groups, whether local, national, or international, reflects the enormous gap in official knowledge that exists regarding these serious experiences, and needs to be taken into account by governments and public authorities. The unofficial nature of this type of survey, which is mainly applied by research groups for academic purposes, means that these studies do not have a real impact on victim protection and care policies. Researchers in developmental victimology need to obtain complete profiles of victimization or to understand the experiences of many children, which may not be limited to a single form of violence. In this sense, poly-victimization has been a neglected component in child victimization. It is only recently that research has begun to analyze the interrelationship between different kinds of victimization in the United States (Finkelhor et al., 2005b), and Canada (Cyr et al., 2013). In Europe, the studies that have provided data about poly-victimization have mainly been conducted in Spain (Pereda et al., 2014) and northerly countries such as the United Kingdom (Radford et al., 2013), Finland (Ellonen & Salmi, 2011) and Sweden (Aho et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Asia—such as Vietnam (Le et al., 2015), or China (Chan, 2013)—and Latin America—such as Chile (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2020) or Mexico (Méndez-López & Pereda, 2019)—have also started to analyze the phenomenon of poly-victimization. Therefore, the study of the co-occurrence of the different forms of victimization, based on the concept that they are connected, constitutes an approach more in line with the victimological reality and it responds to a real problem faced by children that need to be studied. This so-called web of violence is based on evidence from empirical studies that have found that those children who are victims online are also victims offline or outside the virtual world; that those who experience forms of victimization within their families also suffer them outside the family context; and that specific forms of victimization, such as exposure to family violence, are related to other forms of victimization such as physical abuse, neglect, and violent relationships in adolescence (Hamby & Grych, 2013).

Taking this into consideration, there are two fundamental reasons for conducting research with minors: (i) Children and adolescents are the most accurate sources of information about their own lives and experiences. Although, traditionally, adults who know the minor have been interviewed about those aspects that were of interest in the study, it has been shown that the knowledge of these adults, including the parents themselves, is never as complete as the knowledge of a child or adolescent of himself. This is even more true when faced with sensitive issues, such as experiences of violence, and with such important repercussions for the future of the victim (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006); and (ii) children and adolescents have the right to express their opinions. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations states that “the child has the right to express his opinion and to have it taken into account in matters that affect him.” This article, together with the right to freedom of expression (Art. 13), of thought, conscience

and religion (Art. 14), and freedom of association (Art. 15), reaffirms the status of boys and girls as individuals with fundamental rights, opinions, and emotions of their own.¹

2 Phases of Fieldwork

Research with children and adolescents is understood as all those studies on violence in which minors directly participate, regardless of the methodology applied to collect, analyze, and transmit data or information (Graham et al., 2013).

There are three main issues that generate significant doubts about how to proceed when research participants are minors: (i) the inequality of power that exists with the adult researcher, (ii) the need for informed consent by parents or legal guardians of the minor, and (iii) the confidentiality of the information obtained. It is recommended that, at the beginning of each new research project, the work team tries to identify, as much as possible, the potential problems that may arise throughout the study and consider how to guide it in order to respond to them as they appear (see the review by Kirk, 2007). Researchers on developmental victimology could follow several publications aimed to provide guidelines to researchers who work with children and adolescents facilitated by Save the Children (e.g., Laws & Mann, 2004). Spanish-speaking researchers can moreover find advice in the guide written by the Research Group on child and Adolescent Victimization (GReVIA) (Pereda, 2019). Although it is true that studies must be rigorously designed and carried out by qualified researchers to respond to a real social need, those involving children as participants must fulfill this axiom at its maximum.

The first issue to consider when approaching the participation of minors in research projects is the disparity in power and status between adult researchers and children and adolescents. The asymmetry of power occurs due to the difference in age, which places the child generationally in a position of subordination to the adult; however, it can be exacerbated by differences in gender, ethnicity, culture, and social level (Hood et al., 1996). To balance this asymmetry, a series of innovative and creative ideas can be used; for example, there are many on how to offer them information about the research, appropriate to their level of interest, and comprehension, such as the use of photographs of the researchers or the research topic, drawings that explain abstract concepts, diagrams, comic book format, and the use of simple language for those who are beginning to read (see, e.g., Punch, 2002; Mudaly & Goddard, 2009). In turn, the administration of surveys and tests has been proposed through electronic means, to which they are accustomed, and in which the questions are posed through headphones and, at the same time, visually on the screen, which helps the participant understand what is being asked (Black & Ponirakis, 2000).

¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

Secondly, research with children and adolescents must always respect their freedom, their interests, and their well-being, as well as their willingness to participate in the study through informed consent. When conducting research with minors, informed consent is a highly complex issue (Trusell, 2008) as most ethics committees require parental consent. At the same time, it has also been argued that those children who show that they have understood the information provided by the researchers regarding the research and their rights should be able to consent or dissent without the need to also obtain the consent of their parents. Therefore, informed consent can be understood from two different angles: first, from the need to obtain the informed consent of the children and adolescents and, second, from the legal requirement to obtain the informed consent of the minor's parents or legal guardians (Skelton, 2008). Sometimes the consent of other adults present in the lives of children is needed to carry out the study (such as the school headmaster, teachers, parents' associations, psychologists, health professionals, or social workers), especially in samples with specific characteristics, such as minors cared for in mental health centers, juvenile justice, or the protection system.

Regarding consent, our perspective in the GRéVIA is to advocate for obtaining only the consent of the child when conducting studies on victimization, mainly because (i) it gives minors the opportunity to freely decide on their participation and to express their views and perspective, with the consequent ability to decide on their own lives; (ii) it overcomes the adult-centric culture and recognizes the autonomy of children and adolescents, reinforcing our genuine interest in knowing their perspectives and their experiences; (iii) it prevents the lack of participation of those who are being victimized by their parents or caregivers since most of the victimizations against childhood and adolescence occur within the family environment; (iv) and it ensures participation, since it avoids the barrier of parental consent and the decision relies only on the child. However, not asking for parental consent can generate conflicts to the researcher such as rejection of the study by the ethics committee, lack of access to the children, legal complaints, and reports from parents and caregivers. Researchers must then decide if they have solid arguments to ask only for children's consent, or if they have to accomplish with general norms and adapt their research to them. It is still an issue not solved yet and every research group is taking different decisions. One of the options to follow in Spain is to survey adolescents 14 years old and older since they have the legal age to decide about their own personal data (see Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and guarantee of digital rights). Nevertheless, one of the most common situations is that the schools avoid future problems with parents and caregivers requiring the researcher to obtain informed consent from them, even if the rights of the child to participate are not respected. This is a problem that we have solved by always calculating a bigger sample that initially needed to try another school when one of them demands parental informed consent.

Minors are to be found in schools or institutions such as custodial places, hospitals, or orphanages. Therefore, these are the potential places where to conduct our research with these participants. Nevertheless, we then depend on other actors—gatekeepers—such as institutions and professionals, to agree to open their doors to

a research team. In order to succeed in achieving the collaboration of the centers and professionals, it is necessary to contact them sufficiently in advance and anticipate that, possibly, not all of them will agree to be part of the study. We recommend writing a letter or a model mail detailing the basic aspects of the research, the reason why it is being conducted, and the benefits that it can have for the professionals themselves, the participants, and the society as a whole. At the same time, it is important to explain what activity the minors who agree to participate in the study must carry out and whether or not, and how, the consent of the parents or legal guardians will be obtained. To facilitate the collaboration of centers and professionals, it is also recommended to have the support of a public administration via a collaboration with public entities such as Health or Justice Ministries, for instance. Sometimes, it may even be that the same agency that finances the research is in charge of providing the sample or identifying the specific centers from which it will be obtained.

Thirdly, according to article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,² privacy and the right to be free from intrusion or interference by others is a fundamental right. Confidentiality means that the information provided by children and adolescents during our investigations, as well as their identity, must be respected and protected. In other words, the information entrusted to us within the framework of a study should not be shared with anyone else, without the child's agreement. This is particularly relevant in the case of studying sensitive issues, such as child and adolescent victimization, since the participants can provide potentially stigmatizing information and have important repercussions for the child and their environment. Nevertheless, article 16 may be contradictory with what is required by article 3 on the best interests of the minor. If the information participants provide us is likely to conflict with the safeguarding of their best interests (e.g., they give us information that suggests they are at risk), we are faced with a dilemma. An extensive debate has taken place regarding the ethical and legal duty to communicate information provided by children and adolescents in the context of an investigation to parents, legal guardians, and/or professionals or organizations. The decision to break confidentiality to communicate certain information in order to protect the child must respect the law of the place where the investigation is carried out. In GReVIA, we argue that it is essential to guarantee anonymity to obtain valid and reliable results that will be useful to get improvements regarding resources to prevent violence against children or better services to attend victims, while offering the child with hotlines and resources to call if they need professional care and support.

²Article 16. "1. No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation. 2. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks." General Assembly resolution 44/25, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations.

3 Techniques Employed

Developmental victimology has as its essential objective the elaboration of a theoretical corpus contrasted through the use of the scientific method, which allows the processes of victimization to be explained rigorously. Among the methods used in victimological studies to achieve this objective, victimization surveys have been considered one of the most important scientific developments in the field of criminology. They originated in the United States of America at the end of the 1960s with the aim of offering information on the dark figure of crime, i.e., that was not reported to official authorities (Schneider, 2001). This type of technique assesses the extent and characteristics of crime in a given society or group, based on the victims' own perception and experiences, regardless of whether it is known or unknown by official reporting. These surveys provide other useful data such as the reporting rate to the police and have confirmed that, in most cases, the percentage of crimes declared by the people interviewed that were reported to the authorities is actually low compared with the actual victimization rate (Kesteren et al., 2014), especially in the case of child and adolescent victims (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

3.1 *The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire*

A self-reported victimization survey for assessing the victimization of children and adolescents was designed by the director of the Crimes against Children Research Center³ at the University of New Hampshire and worldwide expert on developmental victimology, Prof. David Finkelhor. The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) allows the evaluation of different types of victimization based on reports made by the children and adolescents themselves (Finkelhor et al., 2005a). The JVQ has been applied to different countries worldwide, becoming the gold standard among victimologists and providing useful epidemiological data. The JVQ is considered an excellent instrument for the evaluation of child victimization, with high reliability and validity, and has been psychometrically adapted for its use in China (Cheng et al., 2010), Spain (Pereda et al., 2018), and Portugal (Almeida et al., 2020). Other countries have also applied the JVQ, but a validation study of its psychometric properties has not yet been published (i.e., Finland and Vietnam). To ensure the quality of an instrument and to reduce the risk of introducing bias into a study, the instrument has been properly translated and adapted to that particular culture, its idioms, legal norms, and specific characteristics.

If a researcher was to apply the JVQ, it is to note several aspects. First, the JVQ has several versions that can be used depending on the available amount of time to

³ See <https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/>

conduct the study and how in detail the researcher wants to explore victimization.⁴ Thus, the short version of the self-report possess 34 items, with versions for children aged 8–17 years and adults, but there is also an interview version, for those cases in which we want to delve into the reported victimization experiences, such as who was the perpetrator, the frequency of the victimization, and whether or not the case was notified to the authorities. There is also a version for parents and primary caregivers of children under 8 years of age, who cannot respond to the self-report version by themselves. The long version, the JVQ-R2 (Finkelhor et al., 2011), presents 56 items and has incorporated improvements in the evaluation of online victimization, negligent behavior by the minor's main caregivers, and more items on kidnappings and exposure to violence not only between parents or from parents to children, but also from other relatives such as grandparents. These authors also propose the use of a single screening question⁵ that is asked routinely to the child in contexts such as healthcare or school and which would allow, if necessary, the use of longer versions of the instrument (Hamby et al., 2011). In the victimological setting, this would save a lot of time and would allow all children to be screened.

One of the benefits of the JVQ is that it can be used with different samples to establish estimates of the prevalence of different types of victimization experience and therefore allows comparability across countries.

3.2 The Specific Assessment of Poly-Victimization

The study of poly-victimization brings additional considerations. First, its methodological definition is not as clear and there is still debate about the most reliable way to identify the most victimized group of children and adolescents. Thus, current methodological methods to the definition of poly-victimization depend on the specific objectives of the research and its time period (i.e., lifetime or in the past 12 months), the method used (i.e., victims above the mean, the top 10% of child victims, or clustering techniques), the version of the JVQ applied in a particular country (which may include different numbers of items and consider different victimization modules), and the characteristics of the sample (e.g., community, clinical juvenile justice, and welfare) (Segura et al., 2018). For example, we can speak of multiple victimization when the child suffers more than one form of victimization and poly-victimization if the number of victimizations they have suffered is greater than 90% of those suffered by children of their age and characteristics. Thus, poly-victims correspond to those boys and girls who are in the top 10% of victimization experiences presented by a certain group, generally from the general population, throughout life. All these variables may affect elements such as the rates of

⁴More information can be obtained at the Crimes against Children Research Center: http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/available_versions.html

⁵“Have you been hurt by someone in the last year, or do you ever feel scared or unsafe at home, school, in your neighborhood?”

prevalence recorded being, therefore, difficult to know whether all studies have identified the same at-risk group, namely poly-victims.

In our studies, we apply the method that includes the most victims in the poly-victimized group, both throughout life and in the last 12 months, which involves considering the average number of victimizations of a specific group (be it a sample of the general population or other at-risk samples) plus at least one more victimizing event, based on country-specific publications containing this information. This will ensure that no poly-victims in need of treatment are neglected.

4 Ethics in Research with Minors

Many of the answers that we seek as researchers, when ethical doubts arise, are not found in the deontological codes. In turn, seeking advice from a bioethics committee or commission is not always fruitful, since most of them have no experience nor expertise in research with children. A good solution for this lack could be that the committee request help from an external advisor, specialized in the characteristics and specificities of research with minors; however, this seldom happens. This reality led GReVIA to publish a practical guide for ethical research on violence against children and adolescents, freely available, and which configures an instrument that aims to make it easier for the Spanish-speaker researchers to carry out ethical studies with children and adolescents.⁶

The researcher in developmental victimology is placed in a dilemma that can cause frustration when balancing obtaining reliable and complete information from the participants themselves, i.e., children and adolescents, and to ensure that no further hurt is caused to such vulnerable respondents. This, as any other research involving human beings as participants, can be achieved following ethical principles. These basic principles include respect (and autonomy), beneficence (and not maleficence), justice, and spirit of community and solidarity. However, the inclusion of children and adolescents in research codes is historically very recent, and some of these principles are not yet totally applied when conducting research with children, violating their fundamental rights. Below, we enumerate the principles that we apply in our studies in GReVIA group.

Respect (and Autonomy) This principle assumes that everyone, including children, has the capacity to make a reasoned decision on those issues that affect them and that this decision must be respected. That is, children have the right to make an informed decision regarding whether or not they want to participate in the research, as well as to decide to abandon it at any time. The acceptance of minors to participate in research must be (i) explicit; (ii) informed; (iii) completely voluntary and free from any type of coercion; and (iv) continued or renegotiable, since it does not

⁶ See <https://www.bienestaryproteccioninfantil.es/fuentes1.asp?sec=15&subs=193&cod=4221&page=>

carry any obligation and can be revoked at any time (Gallagher, 2009). However, it is possible that in some cases the parents or legal guardians of the children and adolescents prefer not to participate in the research. This is especially common in studies on experiences that caregivers do not want children to remember, such as maltreatment and sexual abuse. In these exceptional situations, it is important that the investigative team make decisions on a case-by-case basis and seek alternative solutions. For example, if a child expresses his motivation to participate, but his parents or community show reluctance, one could suggest an appointment to elaborate on the study. There may also be cultural or religious factors that influence reluctance to allow children to participate in our research, so these spaces of discussion should guarantee that their views will not be judged.

Beneficence (and Not Maleficence) The second general ethical principle postulates that the research should represent a benefit for the participants or the group they represent, and not be detrimental to them. The principle of non-maleficence has special resonance in research carried out with children due to the disparities of power that exist between adults and minors. Therefore, it is essential to talk with children about the benefits and risks of research. This can be done in the classroom, before the administration of the survey, either at the beginning, when the researchers introduce themselves and the study or at the end of the data collection, once the participants finished answering the questionnaire. Regarding the benefits, some of the following can be highlighted: underline the fact that their memories and experiences are important for society, remember their right to give their opinion on matters that concern them, have the opportunity to share their experiences, etc. Likewise, it is essential to talk about the risks involved in participating in the research, for instance, that some of the questions or topics may cause them discomfort. For this reason, it is recommended to offer different support options for all participants, contacts of associations, or professionals specialized in victim assistance who can help them in case of need (Carroll-Lind et al., 2006).

Justice The principle of justice requires investigators to pay attention to the differences in power inherent in the investigative relationship established between an adult (researcher) and a child (participant). The adult-centered view tends to make the rights of children and adolescents invisible and, in turn, subordinates their perspective on issues that affect the adult view. From an ethical research perspective, we must respectfully listen to the opinions of minors, grant them due importance, and respond to their questions and/or comments. In addition, all communication within the framework of the study must consider the needs of the minor and take into account their level of development. Also, homeless children, children with disabilities, children of illegal immigrants, unaccompanied minors, child victims of people trafficking, children who work, children with certain psychiatric diagnoses, and homosexual and transsexual children should never be discriminated against in research. The number of studies conducted on victimization in these populations is really scarce. Therefore, researchers on developmental victimology are generally not accomplishing the principle of justice. That is, participation in the study must be done following the principles of inclusion according to the objective of the research

and not because there is easier access to some groups of children (i.e., children attending school) than others. To have access to hard-to-reach underage populations, one should seek the collaboration of NGOs and victim associations. A strategy to make them cooperate is showing them, through talks, seminars, or informal meetings on topics of their interest, the relevance, and impact of our studies.

Spirit of Community and Solidarity The studies we conduct must provide information and proposals aimed at meeting the real world needs of children in our society, the professionals who treat them, and the families with whom they live. There is a concept, which is not often used in victimology, but is frequently used in other areas of study such as finance, which is the return of investment (ROI), referring to what we will return to society with our research. When considering any research project on child and adolescent victimization, this perspective should be incorporated in order to guarantee that the investment of economic resources generates the expected social benefits, specifically for the group on which you are working. A good way to do this is to involve NGOs and other associations in the proposals and good practices suggested from the results obtained in the project to lead to more effective policy-making. It is also important to share our results not only in academic forums but to practitioners and other professionals in informative journals, seminars, and talks, as well as on media such as television, radio, or social networks, like LinkedIn, Twitter, or Facebook.

Research Justification Children and adolescents must be protected against the dangers of both too little and too much research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Likewise, ideologies, prejudices, and preconceptions must be left aside to deal with the issue with the greatest possible objectivity. Even if we admit that research is always influenced by our own preconceptions, we should seek neutrality and aim to falsify our hypotheses. One good example is how preconceptions can influence science if the field of teen dating violence is considered as *gendered violence*, therefore assuming that women are victims and men perpetrators. However, research has shown that the problem of violence in adolescent couples is bidirectional (Park & Kim, 2019), although it seems contradictory when compared to the information provided by the media or some governmental statements. In brief, as researchers, we need to analyze only what the data show.

5 Emotions

Receiving sensitive and emotionally intense information, continuously, for a certain period of time about violence endured by children can be challenging. Researchers analyze the transcripts or the answers to the questionnaires during the data collection and analysis phase, but also codify the information, reflect on it, and discuss it in the publication phase and in the dissemination of the results. They are in constant contact with traumatic and highly sensitive material that can undoubtedly cause discomfort (Beale & Hillege, 2004). Vicarious traumatization (McCann & Pearlman,

1990), which can appear in research on violence, secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002), is not rare. In consequence, the members of the research team should receive specific training on these issues, but also be offered debriefing sessions with the members of the research team (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009), or even in case of need supervision sessions with specialized professionals (Schenk & Williamson, 2005). Moreover, during training, they should also reflect on their own experiences as victims of violence and how these can affect their decisions and behavior throughout the study. To lead successfully a research group such as the GREVIA, you need to know all this in advance and follow the steps others have established previously to avoid hurting your own team of researchers. Open and honest communication is key.

Another resource that seems to protect researchers from this phenomenon is knowing in advance the chain of authority and responsibility, knowing who to turn to in case of doubts and situations that may arise, especially in the face of ethical questions (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006). Leadership must be clear, and decisions need to be taken with confidence. In the GREVIA, we function as a very close team and early researchers are always supervised and accompanied by senior or more advanced researchers. This informal support network is very successful when addressing feelings of distress or frustration regarding our work. In our case, the majority of our researchers are psychologists, but, if not, a good advice is to include one in the research group who can help with detecting these feelings and situations.

Researching in developmental victimology has been shown to be much more challenging than working with children in other contexts (Guerra & Pereda, 2015). The researcher working with child victimization has to be prepared and has to know their own role. In this vein, a dramatic view of our role—taking the research to the personal level, for instance—is negative for both the researcher and the research. Even though research can improve the lives of many children who suffer violence, we cannot immediately protect nor “save” all children. Otherwise, there is a risk of over-identification with the object of study, which is something that puts in doubt the reliability of the research. In that sense, it is to note that, in my view, we should limit ourselves to the role of researchers and avoid becoming activists. Our ultimate goal should be focused on assisting governments, institutions, and the general population to acquire an evidence-based knowledge on the extension and impact of child and adolescent victimization, and based on that, take better decisions to protect children, to early detect violent experiences, and to intervene with child victims more efficiently and effectively. This is what is known as evidence-based practice. This is what we do.

However, it is true that our expectations regarding transferring research into practice might take some time or might not even succeed, especially in countries such as Spain where evidence-based practice is still in its infancy. This can generate enormous frustration and emotional distress. For example, we know that the perspective of poly-victimization should permeate the work of those who intervene with minors who are victims of multiple forms of violence, given that the prognosis of these children and adolescents is very different from those who have not been poly-victimized, and the treatment that should be offered is much more intensive

and should be conducted by professionals specialized in complex trauma intervention, but the lack of specific and specialized training in the treatment of child victims and, especially, poly-victims, is a serious problem and intervention by professionals who are unaware of the particular characteristics of a child poses a high risk of secondary victimization. Nevertheless, we have applied a strategy that improved the flow from evidence to practice, which is participatory research. During the latter, we collaborated actively with NGOs and other institutions for conducting the research, and this increased the dissemination of the results and the adoption, utilization, and implementation of evidence-based guidelines.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

The theoretical framework of developmental victimology and the concept of poly-victimization have revolutionized the last 15 years of studies in child and adolescent victimology, expanding the evaluation of violence to other forms of victimization other than child abuse and analyzing the serious effects that the accumulation of experiences of violence in childhood has on development (Finkelhor, 2008). However, the practical implications of this concept have not yet been sufficiently applied to the professional field, nor to the design of evidence-based public policies to prevent violence against children and youth. It is clear that social researchers have an important role to play. Many social scientists who do policy-oriented research take for granted that government and public policy offices should use the results of their work; specially if the government is funding the research, presumably officials have, or had, some intent to apply the results (Weiss, 1995). But most of the times this does not happen or, at least, not as the researcher imagined. Policymakers and stakeholders need to gradually assimilate research while they gradually develop policies. To facilitate this process, we must be able to disseminate our results not only in academic forums but also in documents, news, or comments on social networks, which bring our results closer to society in an easy and understandable way. Our studies should provide feasible direction for action and be easily accessible. Then, we need to be able to help those interested in accessing the instruments, create protocols and guidelines, and assess their current methods and interventions. If researchers want to reach policymakers, they have to rely on other mechanisms than direct contact. The mass media, social networks, think tanks, victim associations, NGOs, and other interest groups should also be approached. These channels for the transmission of research results can introduce a good deal of research into the policy process. The best news is that research has played an important role in the rethinking of public policies about crime victims and that stakeholders would welcome help in understanding what policy-oriented social science has to say (Weiss, 1995).

Research has played an important role in understanding the impact of criminal victimization and has helped shape policies and programs for helping victims cope (Davis, 1987). It should continue doing so, but the protective factors that allow the

child victim to move forward and become a healthy and socially integrated adult despite their victimization experiences are still a line of study to be developed in victimology research (Masten, 2001). The presence or absence of certain variables, not only related to the objective characteristics of the experience of violence but also to individual and psychosocial factors, would consistently facilitate the appearance of psychopathological disorders, while the presence or absence of other variables would minimize or nullify the possible psychological effects related to victimization and would provide the individual with the capacity to resist this stressor (Rutter, 2007). These outcomes assume the opening up to a wide field of work and greater possibilities for intervention and tertiary prevention for professionals who care for victims. A better knowledge of the variables involved in the processes of protection of child victims will allow better treatment, as well as the prevention of subsequent psychological problems. Practitioners need to know what factors may be strengthened in children to further promote positive appropriate responses after victimization. Research can help them do so. One feasible option is to adapt good-quality free-access surveys to assess protective factors that practitioners can use in their work to design interventions focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the victims (see, e.g., Guilera et al., 2015).

Regarding the method for obtaining data of victimological relevance, some of the main criticisms of victimization surveys have been overcome by the publication of the JVQ, an instrument applied in many different countries worldwide. Nevertheless, although the JVQ is one of the best measures for determining the real extent of child and adolescent victimization in a community, one of its main limitations is that, in many cases, the studies that have been conducted did not include certain at-risk groups of children, which could lead to a lack of representation in the surveyed sample and which in turn could lead to underestimating serious experiences of victimization. Thus, for example, the presence of a high number of Moroccan and sub-Saharan African-born children who do not speak Spanish in residential centers of the welfare system in Spain needs to be taken into account when conducting research in this context. This reality also requires that the instrument that the researcher has chosen to be applied is adapted to another language and culture. If the researcher is not a native speaker in that language, a cultural mediator to help them with the adaptation will be needed. Once more, we need to work closely with NGOs and other associations who will facilitate these resources if they are involved and support our study. Otherwise, we will have to look for a cultural mediator who helps us. Future victimological research should be oriented toward specific at-risk groups of children and adolescents, such as gender, sexual, and ethnic minorities, or those with disabilities, to allow the inclusion of their voice and violent experiences.

Regarding ethical issues, the field of developmental victimology is recent, and different topics are still under discussion. Some of the questions that generate the most ethical doubts when the research participants are minors are the need for informed consent by the minor's parents or legal guardians and the confidentiality of the information obtained regarding experiences of violence. Thus, regarding the first question of interest, it has been argued that those children who demonstrate that

they have understood the information provided by the researchers regarding the investigation and their rights should be able to consent or disagree without the need to also obtain parental consent (Skelton, 2008). However, this decision is always made on the basis of the regulatory law and the ethics committees of the country, which generally require the active consent of parents in order to carry out the investigation. Thus, not asking for parental consent in research with children and youth under 16 years of age in Europe is controversial, it is rarely accepted by ethics committees, and it is not usually contemplated within the legal regulation on data protection.

The reality of power dynamics indicates that when the wishes of the child and those of the adult conflict, it is the wishes of the child that are subordinated to those of the adult. Then, researchers must make a decision and the more protective one is to adapt to the regulations and norms in relation to this topic, even if this decision is against the rights of the child. Otherwise, serious consequences can arise and the most frequent is that the research cannot be conducted. So, nowadays most of the research in Europe is conducted with underage children asking for their parental consent, or adolescents older than 15 years old giving their consent. Regarding the second question of interest, if our survey is not anonymous the information obtained regarding victimization must be used exclusively to initiate an evaluation of the situation of the child or adolescent by the social and/or health services. The data obtained in victimological research cannot be considered an accurate forensic interview. Therefore, no other use should be given to this information, such as providing it as evidence in legal conflicts (Cashmore, 2006). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the preferred option of minors seems to be self-reporting, that is, making it easier for the child or adolescent at risk that we have met during our research to report it on their own or talk about it with a trusted adult (Fisher et al., 1996). Giving participants the contacts of associations or professionals specialized in victim assistance who are close to them and can help them is a good option.

In summary, there is much work to be done in the field of developmental victimology, which will require the joint effort of academics and those who are responsible for the prevention of violence against children and intervention with its victims if the ultimate goal is to protect and ensure the well-being of children and adolescents based on evidence and the results of empirical studies. It is a priority that future criminological professionals understand and know how to carry out methodologically rigorous research in the developmental victimology area, the purpose of which, in addition to understanding the social reality, is to solve problems related to the discipline, which can be generalized and applied with the support of the theory but also with the results obtained in the investigation. It is important to remember that “research implies action and commitment that lead to progress” (Beristain, 2000, p. 230).

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Chapter 14

Research with Trafficking Victims: Exploring Methods, Ethics and Emotions



Anette Brunovskis  and Rebecca Surtees 

1 Introduction

Human trafficking is a term that broadly refers to the exploitation of human beings. While exploitation is in no way a new invention, this particular framing was integrated into international law and policy just over 20 years ago, at the turn of the millennium. Since then, interest in human trafficking research has grown exponentially, and the research field itself has developed and changed over these years.

Over the past two decades, we have, together and separately, conducted a large number of research studies in Europe, the former Soviet Union and South-East Asia. Most of these studies have involved in-depth interviews with trafficking victims and anti-trafficking practitioners from different fields of work (social work, psychology, criminal justice, education, health, etc.). These studies have been conducted with men, women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour, begging, criminal activities and forced marriage. Most of this research has been focused specifically on victims' experiences of interventions—identification, protection, assistance, reintegration and access to justice. Much of our research has been applied in nature, targeting policymakers and practitioners to contribute to improved interventions for trafficked persons.

In this chapter, we will share ethical and methodological issues that have come up in these different research projects and some of what we have learned along the way. There is, of course, great variety in our interview experiences over these many years and in many different countries. We have, for the most part, conducted interviews with practitioners and trafficking victims ourselves, although for some

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studies we have also engaged researchers to conduct interviews alongside us or under our supervision. Interview settings have varied substantially but are always decided in consultation with practitioners and together with the respondent, based on what they assessed to be the safest and most comfortable setting. We have conducted interviews in offices, meeting rooms or counselling rooms at assistance organisations, shelters, residential facilities, drop-in centres and day programmes. We have also conducted interviews in public places—cafes, restaurants and public parks, while taking a walk or sitting on a sidewalk. We have interviewed victims in private settings like a car as well as visiting them in their homes and communities. Some interviews have been quite time bound and structured while others have been more organic—for example, spending the day together, sharing a meal and meeting their family. As qualitative researchers, these contexts have given us valuable insights and background for our analytic work and we have sought to the greatest extent possible to be in the field and conduct interviews ourselves, when this has been appropriate in the given context. It also means that with each new project, there is almost always something that is new and unexpected.

1.1 What Is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking came to prominence on the international agenda with the signing of the so-called United Nations Trafficking Protocol in December 2000 (hereafter: the Trafficking Protocol) (United Nations, 2000), which formed the basis of legislation in signatory states in subsequent years. Human trafficking is commonly equated with “modern slavery” and, in some quarters, more specifically with “sex slavery”. However, it encompasses a vast range of exploitative situations, not all of them easily or immediately recognisable as “slavery” or even as grossly exploitative and not all of which are sexual in nature. Particularly in the early days of trafficking policy, practice and research, there was a predominant focus on the movement of women and girls across international borders, although the definition of trafficking is not limited to transnational exploitation nor does it require movement. While human trafficking is often associated with very violent and abusive practices, its definition is also inclusive of exploitation of vulnerability and situations that are perhaps not immediately or easily recognisable as coercive.

In Article 3 of the Trafficking Protocol, human trafficking is defined by a list of actions and means, undertaken for the purpose of exploitation:

- (a) “Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

- (b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.
- (c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article.
- (d) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

The core elements in this definition are a set of *actions* (“recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons”), by a set of *means* (“threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person”), for the *purpose* of exploitation (sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs). In the case of children, *means* are deemed irrelevant; only *actions* for the *purpose* of exploitation are required to constitute human trafficking.

1.2 *Developments in Human Trafficking as a Research Field*

Human trafficking research has undergone significant developments since the early years following the signing of the trafficking protocol. A review of human trafficking research in 2008 found that very little of the literature was empirically based and that which was, was almost exclusively based on limited qualitative data with secondary sources, leaning heavily on interviews with anti-trafficking practitioners and other stakeholders (Gozdziak & Bump, 2008). Very little literature was based on learning from trafficked persons themselves, what were their needs and how they experienced policies and interventions designed for them (Gozdziak & Collett, 2005).

In the same period, sensationalist media representations of human trafficking were coupled with high and unsubstantiated estimates of the prevalence of human trafficking. It was common to refer to human trafficking as an “epidemic”, from which “no country is immune” (Botti, 2002; UNODC, n.d.). Claudia Aradau noted about early human trafficking literature that much of it was written “... with the purpose of intervention in the existing regimes to govern human trafficking.” Further, Aradau argued that the literature “... engages in a contestation of what trafficking is and attempts to stabilize the ‘truth’ about its meaning...” (Aradau, 2008, p. 20). The volume of literature written with the express purpose of advocacy translated into a particular and highly emotive tone in much early literature in the field.

What emerged in the years immediately preceding and following the development of an international anti-trafficking framework was, on the one hand, literature that pointed to heinous crimes and gross sexual exploitation and urged action and, on the other hand, a critique of anti-trafficking responses as predominantly fuelled by “moral panic” (see, for instance, Anderson & Andrijasevic, 2008; Berman, 2003; Doezema, 2000; Gould, 2010; Keo et al., 2014; Weitzer, 2007).

Lobasz observed that the meaning of human trafficking was heatedly disputed, among actors with opposing perspectives, and concluded that “human trafficking” is better understood as a contested concept rather than as an objectively given problem: “The meaning of trafficking is constructed rather than inherent, and inseparable from the political context through which it is produced.” (Lobasz, 2012, p. 1). Human trafficking continues to be a contested term, with much disagreement about the usefulness and appropriateness of the concept and what policies and interventions are best suited to prevent and address it. Because human trafficking is so contested, there are fundamentally different positions on how human trafficking should be understood, including in the research literature—not least whether it is a helpful framework to assist and protect exploited persons or whether it essentially places disadvantaged people in even greater peril and legitimises restrictive control measures against them (Brunovskis, 2019).

Overall, the quality of trafficking research has improved over time with less sensationalism. There is also greater engagement of trafficking victims in research and greater attention to methods and ethics in how this research is being done. At the time of writing, there are several well-established peer-reviewed human trafficking research journals, as well as special issues on trafficking research in other established journals (see, for instance, *Anti-trafficking Review*, 2022; *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2022). There is also an increasing amount of research on human trafficking in academic books and edited volumes.

2 Empirical Trafficking Research—Engaging with Trafficked Persons

Despite a growth in human trafficking research and literature, there is still a great need for empirically based, critical analysis of different aspects of human trafficking, both as a phenomenon and as a field of work (Gozdziaik & Graveline, 2015). The empirical investigation seems particularly important in a contested field like human trafficking, to anchor and substantiate discussions and arguments (Brunovskis, 2019).

When we first entered this field more than 20 years ago, very little research was being conducted directly with trafficking victims. What research was done focused on the trafficking event itself—how victims were trafficked and exploited—rather than victims’ situations and needs after trafficking exploitation ended. At that time, we conducted a series of in-depth qualitative studies with trafficking victims at the centre of our research, engaging with trafficking victims about how to better identify, protect and support the recovery and reintegration of trafficking victims and their families. One of our early studies focused on why trafficking victims declined assistance, another on how victims experienced and valued practices around identification, return, assistance and reintegration and others still on discrete aspects of identification, assistance and reintegration.

What was perhaps most striking to us in these early studies was that what many trafficking victims described as their most pressing issues and concerns did not align with what little literature existed in the field at the time. While trafficking victims sometimes did speak about their fear of traffickers and their trafficking sufferings and traumas, they were often as, if not more, concerned with the present: finding a job, getting documents for themselves or children, finding an affordable place to live, dealing with bureaucratic procedures, resolving tension in family relationships, feeling better mentally and physically, finding childcare and so on (see, for instance, Surtees, 2007; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012). This is illustrative of the importance of engaging directly with trafficking victims to move beyond the “high drama” of human trafficking narratives, which ultimately can mask the seemingly more “mundane” realities of what trafficked persons actually need and want in the immediate and in the longer term.

These realities were also what created vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation from the outset and what could potentially undermine recovery and reintegration after trafficking and, thus, are at the core of the matter. This seems as relevant an observation today as it was two decades ago. Another critical finding was that trafficking victims do not always understand and experience interventions as practitioners and service providers intend. Being identified as a trafficking victim and offered assistance is often frightening to victims who can be emerging from highly controlling, violent and exploitative situations, which may have started by seemingly being offered help by someone that they thought they could trust. This highlights that we can only design and implement effective responses when they are considered through the lens of trafficked persons (including considering the varying experiences of different trafficking victims).

While critically important, there are some inherent challenges in engaging with trafficked persons for research. Some challenges are common to all research with so-called vulnerable groups, while others may be more particular to human trafficking. Human trafficking research is generally taken to be relatively difficult, particularly due to its hidden and illicit nature. Both trafficked persons and their traffickers are referred to as “hidden” or “hard-to-reach” populations—that is, population groups that are difficult to reach with conventional research methods, due to stigma, marginalisation, danger to respondents and researchers, and/or other reasons (see, for instance, Arsovska, 2008; Zhang & Larsen, 2021). Trafficked persons are also generally assumed to be vulnerable, in the sense that they may either lack resources or are in a position of dependency on service providers, authorities or others. In research with vulnerable persons or groups, researchers have a particular responsibility to ensure the ethical treatment of respondents (NESH, 2016).

3 The Potential for Harm in Trafficking Research

Methodological and ethical considerations are inextricably bound together in all research, but with a particular importance in research with persons who may be in vulnerable or risky situations. The principle of “do no harm” is at the heart of all ethical research, especially with vulnerable persons like trafficking victims, but what does it mean in practice? How do we avoid or reduce the risk of harm given the many challenges involved in trafficking research including in different settings and with different types of research projects and respondents? Over the years and across the many contexts where we have conducted research and institutional and organisational frameworks for ethical review have varied greatly—from more or less non-existent to comprehensive. Abiding by local legislation and regulation is a minimum requirement, but may not always be sufficient to avoid harm. It remains the responsibility of the researchers to make independent ethical assessments regardless of whether formal permissions have been given and research processes have been approved.

Harm may be caused when exploring sensitive issues with trafficking victims or even reviving trauma suffered as a consequence of trafficking. Researchers need to consider carefully what information we do (and do not) need for the purpose of a particular study and what topics and questions therefore may be avoided. For example, in our research on identification, protection and support and reintegration we do not always specifically ask respondents to share their trafficking experience but rather focus on their situation and needs after trafficking. This helps to avoid some sensitivities when it does not yield pertinent information for the research. However, what will be a sensitive subject is not always what we anticipate nor is it always linked to the trafficking experience (Brunovskis, 2012, 2015). We have found across different projects that one source of great sensitivity can be the victim’s role within the family as a consequence of trafficking and their relationships with different family members—for example, as mother, father, child or spouse (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013).

Harm may also occur when researchers’ presence intrudes on trafficked persons’ privacy and anonymity and breaches their confidentiality. Many trafficking victims keep some or all of their trafficking experiences a secret. If not carefully executed, research may (inadvertently) lead to trafficking experiences becoming known to family, friends and neighbours including traffickers. This, in turn, may lead to stigmatisation, discrimination and even violence in the family and community. It may also lead to further harm from traffickers and their associates, for example, when traffickers live in and around the victim’s home community or in areas where traffickers are operating.

Harm may occur when researchers (unintentionally) raise expectations that respondents will somehow benefit from participation in research (e.g. with access to more or different services) or when researchers are not able to help them find support (e.g. because services do not exist in their area, available services are

unsuitable or even substandard or there are logistical barriers to assistance) (Surtees & Brunovskis, 2016).

Despite the potential for harm when conducting research with trafficking victims, it is not inevitable. Research can be a positive and even empowering experience for respondents. One study with rape survivors found that when researchers reduced the hierarchy between the interviewee and interviewer, research could provide an emotionally and supportive setting for respondents to share their thoughts and experiences (Campbell et al., 2010).

In our research, we typically end interviews by asking why respondents agreed to participate, any concerns they had or have, how they felt about being interviewed (good and bad) and what we could do to improve the interview in future. In one study, we interviewed trafficking victims specifically about their experiences of research (Surtees & Craggs, 2010). While generally nervous or anxious beforehand, most felt positive afterwards including being happy to contribute to discussions of victims' needs and solutions and feeling empowered by having their opinions sought and valued. Many exploited persons we have interviewed wanted to contribute to increased understanding of trafficking and improved services for others. Others were relieved to discuss their experiences with someone who would not judge them. Several had kept their trafficking secret from family and friends, and an interview was their only opportunity to discuss what they have been through outside of an assistance setting (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010).

Risk of harm can also be mitigated by engaging trafficked persons in a discussion of what methods and approaches are most comfortable, ethical and appropriate for (different) trafficked persons, at different stages of their trafficking experience and post-trafficking lives and what factors influence their participation and disclosure. It means understanding what trafficked persons will share with us, why and when, including why they may not participate in research at all. It also means understanding what are the reasons for different decisions among different victims in different settings as harm is often individual and context-specific.

4 Research in an Institutional Context

Concerns about harm mean that we often conduct research through service providers and with trafficking victims who have been formally identified and assisted as part of the anti-trafficking assistance framework. Service providers are organisations, institutions and individuals from non-governmental, international and governmental organisations that provide one or more services or forms of assistance to trafficking victims. These may include social workers, psychologists, shelter staff, medical personnel, legal professionals, educators and trainers. Some are specialised in assisting trafficking victims, while others assist trafficking victims alongside other vulnerable persons. Working through service providers means that a range of trafficking victims can be contacted in a way that does not encroach on their privacy or confidentiality. It also allows us to set some criteria for inclusion (e.g. those who

are emotionally stable and are able to reflect on the research questions). It allows practitioners and victims to read and assess information about the research project and take the time needed to make an informed choice about participation.

Despite these advantages, this approach comes with its own challenges and implications that must be considered, both methodologically and ethically. This includes differences between assisted and unassisted victims; how service providers influence access to respondents; and how institutional contexts may skew information from victims.

4.1 Differences Between Assisted and Unassisted Victims

It is important to think critically about who is included (and who is omitted) in current analyses of human trafficking. Much research with trafficking victims, ours included, takes place within assistance frameworks. There continues to be an unstated and seemingly unquestioned premise that information from assisted victims is consistent with that of victims who are not assisted. However, over the course of many research studies in Europe and Asia we have found that this is generally not the case and that, as a result, some victims' perspectives and experiences are considered and even privileged over others.

Different factors influence who does (and does not) come into the assistance framework. Whether someone receives or accepts assistance is informed by, for example, their education, level of need, family situation, social networks and capital, socio-economic situation, access to information about services, geographic proximity to services, trust in assistance organisations, suitability of available services, past assistance experiences (negative and/or positive), conditions for receiving assistance and the specific nature of their trafficking experience. Social and cultural norms also impact who is offered and willing to accept assistance. Anti-trafficking professionals may also manifest biases, for example, with women more likely to be recognised as trafficked and men more likely to be perceived as irregular migrants. Victims themselves manifest social biases—e.g. around masculinity (i.e. strength, stoicism, self-sufficiency, being the breadwinner and/or the household head)—making them resistant to being labelled “trafficked” or “victims” or willing to seek out or accept assistance (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007; Surtees, 2008; Surtees & Craggs, 2010; Smiragina-Ingelstrom, 2020).

Legislative and policy frameworks (and, equally, funding opportunities) dictate who is (and is not) eligible or prioritised for assistance—e.g. women and children but not men, victims of sexual trafficking but not labour trafficking, child but not adult victims and foreign but not country nationals. Where laws and policies have very specific or high threshold requirements for assistance (e.g. cooperation with law enforcement), assisted victims will, in all likelihood, manifest a greater level of exploitation or abuse than victims assisted in other countries like where the burden of proof for trafficking status is lower or different.

4.2 The Influence of Service Providers on Access to Respondents

Much research involving trafficking victims is arranged through institutions or organisations, most commonly those providing assistance and reintegration services. As facilitators, they act as entry points and also potential safeguards for those who are often in less powerful positions. People in vulnerable situations may be less able to resist research participation that is not in their best interest or feel less empowered to decline interview requests. Institutions and organisations can help convey information in such a way that their beneficiaries may better be able to understand the research, what it requires of them and to assess any potential consequences of participating.

In much of our research, we first contact different service providers through their organisations or institutions and share written information about the research project—the objective, how it will be carried out, what kind of questions we will ask, who is funding the study and how the research findings will be shared with organisations, institutions and respondents (e.g. sharing the report and presentations). We also discuss our criteria for which trafficking victims might be suitable respondents. This relates both to the target group for the study and to the personal situation of potential respondents, e.g. those who are sufficiently stable or resilient, not in crisis mode, able to provide informed consent and can safely participate. We then ask service providers to contact potential research respondents about their interest and willingness to participate in research, sharing also written material about the research project, which has been tailored to the specific target group and translated into relevant languages.

The role of services providers and their affiliated organisations and institutions is not neutral and involves different power dynamics (between trafficked persons and services providers; between service providers and researchers) and various issues related to informed consent. When approaching research respondents through service providers, beneficiaries may feel obliged on some level to participate in research if they are asked by someone to whom they feel thankful or even indebted (Miller & Bell, 2002). There is a complicated terrain surrounding consent and feelings of reciprocity and power dynamics between “assisted” and “assister” may function in subtle and inadvertent ways (Surtees, 2007; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; Surtees & Craggs, 2010).

Organisations and institutions can also have very different attitudes towards and opinions about the usefulness of research, which plays into their willingness to participate in research including facilitating access to trafficking victims as respondents. We generally find service providers to be supportive of research and open to learning that they can use for their programmes. In addition to sharing research reports, we also prepare summary practitioner versions, conduct presentations and seminars to share results and so on. Nonetheless, some service providers turn into “gatekeepers,” taking on a role of controlling access to potential research respondents.

Most assistance agencies, including those with a positive attitude towards research, are cautious about researchers' access to beneficiaries, to avoid discomfort and re-traumatisation and to protect victims' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. However, we have also found that some agencies exert an element of control, both over victims and over information that victims may wish or choose to share. In one of our studies, on why victims sometimes decline assistance (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007), we interviewed a 17-year-old girl with her consent and with her mother and social worker present. Afterwards, she and her parents invited us to contact her again. However, one nongovernment organisation objected to a follow-up interview, despite this consent and our adherence to protocols for interviewing children. While the girl and her parents had been fully informed of and consented to the interview, the organisation argued that given "who the parents were" (i.e. poor, uneducated and from an ethnic minority) that they did not have the capacity to consent. The authority to consent to or decline research participation lies, after all, with the potential respondent only, and assistance agencies have no implicit power of attorney over victims with whom they work. This practice, of setting aside individuals' rights to make their own decisions, was particularly jarring in a context where people received assistance precisely because they had previously been robbed of their autonomy (i.e. been trafficked).

4.3 How Institutional Contexts Can Skew Information from Victims

In one study on why some trafficking victims declined assistance, we found that most agencies were receptive to the study, having grappled with this problem in their work. Agencies facilitated interviews with their staff and contacted trafficking victims to see if they would be willing to be interviewed (some agreed; some did not). By contrast, other organisations were neither open about their work—one said "no one ever declines our assistance"—nor willing to contact beneficiaries about participating in the research (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007). Similarly, in a multi-country study on the reintegration of trafficking victims in Southeast Asia, assistance agencies were fully informed about the research, including the research questions. While staff initially agreed to the research and facilitated access to victim respondents, one organisation insisted on sitting in on interviews (we declined) and in another instance staff demanded to see interview transcripts (we declined and no further interviews took place through this organisation) (Surtees, 2013). This raises questions of what information is missed when research becomes impossible due to ethical reasons, as in these cases. Our impression has been that organisations that try to control access and information from victims they assist may also be more controlling of these victims in the context of their assistance programme. When we miss the opportunity to examine the experiences of people assisted under such

circumstances, important information is lost about trafficked persons' real experiences of different forms of assistance and different types of organisations and institutions.

It is also important to consider whether there are aspects of the institutional setting that influence what respondents feel they can discuss freely in a research context. Particularly in the early days of anti-trafficking policy, several organisations had strict requirements for beneficiaries to qualify for assistance. Some would not, for instance, help women who had knowingly entered prostitution. This created a particular narrative environment, where some accounts were more acceptable and likely to be told than others. Our experience was also that fear of stigma and sometimes bullying within residential assistance would make it very difficult for women with other experiences than "ideal victimhood" and forced prostitution to be open about it. In this way, the dominant human trafficking narratives became self-reinforcing by effectively silencing other stories.

In our experience, even when service providers are supportive and facilitate research, they will sometimes contact only their "successful cases," that is, beneficiaries who have completed assistance programmes and are happy with the services they have received. This is not necessarily a function of organisations trying to control information or act as gatekeepers but may also be because these beneficiaries are most able to assess services, less likely to be traumatised by an interview, easiest to contact, still in touch with and open to be contacted by organisations and so on. Nonetheless, this dynamic means that the experiences and needs of less satisfied beneficiaries (including those who have dropped out or been expelled from assistance programmes) are not part of the general body of knowledge to the same extent. This point was brought home to us in one study when the social worker referred us to a very unhappy and dissatisfied beneficiary who felt that the organisation had not done enough for her and that she had been left on her own. This woman's experience and reflections offered a starkly different lens as to what was (and was not) working in the assistance framework.

Practical and logistical considerations also inform which victims participate in research. Simply finding a suitable time and venue for an interview can be a challenge. Many victims are unable to travel to an interview location because of a lack of money, lack of time, because respondents are working, travel distances/times involved, lack of childcare, inappropriateness of travelling or leaving their community unaccompanied, etc. Researchers travelling to and interviewing in a respondent's home community is not always advisable for ethical and safety reasons (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; Surtees, 2013).

5 Interviewing Outside of an Institutional Context

The potential biases we have discussed above highlight the importance of accessing trafficking victims more broadly, documenting and analysing not only those narratives that are by now established, but also those stories that are presently untold.

This includes research with unidentified and unassisted victims and with trafficking victims' in their family and community setting. This wider lens offers learning that is different from what is currently known and, in turn, can translate into interventions and policies that are more responsive to other trafficking victims. However, research outside of the assistance framework is not without risk and must be carefully considered and managed.

5.1 Research with Unidentified, Unassisted Victims

The focus on assisted victims in trafficking research leaves many trafficking victims understudied and, by extension, underconsidered. Many trafficking victims are identified but not assisted—for example, they decline to be labelled “trafficked,” are unsatisfied with available assistance, do not wish to return home, do not trust service providers, do not need assistance or have other forms of support (see, for instance, Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007; Lisborg & Plambech, 2009; Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020). Many others are never identified—for example, because of poor identification processes, limited capacity of anti-trafficking professionals, specific legal or administrative procedures, because they avoid being identified, un conducive settings for identification, confusion and disorientation among victims at identification, language and cultural barriers, not being seen or understood as victims, not seeing themselves as victims, unwillingness to talk about their experiences, less recognisable forms of trafficking, less typical victims and the politics of identification (Spanger, 2011; Pickering & Ham, 2014). We do not know the extent to which these groups are (and are not) represented by the experiences and characteristics of assisted victims, including how this might fluctuate from place to place and over time. In our own research in the Balkans, for example, we found that assisted victims may be more likely to have family problems (they accept assistance in part because they lack family support) while unassisted victims sometimes decline support because they are able to return home and receive family and community-based help (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007).

However, including unidentified and unassisted trafficked persons in research requires careful attention to the potential for harm. Some trafficked persons consciously chose not to be identified and assisted. They may have been identified but declined assistance or they may have declined even to be identified (e.g. opting to be arrested or deported rather than labelled and assisted as trafficked). Seeking them out for research purposes potentially breaches their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality and may introduce risks.

While research in victims' home communities is one entry point, it should be approached with caution and only with in-depth knowledge of the community and culture in question. Researchers' presence in communities does have an impact and we do not always know what that impact will be. Because we know so little about unassisted victims (including their relations and position within their families

and communities), we need to be particularly careful about if and how our presence identifies them.

In our research on reintegration in Indonesia (Surtees, 2017a, b, d, 2018), we were able to approach unidentified trafficking victims through migrant worker activists and community leaders as the research team had worked previously in these communities. We first visited migrant worker activists and community leaders in their communities who were familiar with persons with bad migration experiences and discussed who might be suitable respondents and who should (and should not) be approached due to the risk of harm to the respondent (i.e. emotional or psychological harm and physical harm). They then contacted these respondents on our behalf, travelling to their homes to explain the research (providing both a written and verbal explanation of the research) and to ask about their interest and willingness to be interviewed for the research. Individuals who agreed were then asked to provide a contact number where they could be reached and one of the research team called them to further explain the research, answer any questions they had and then, with their consent, arrange an in-person interview in their community or a location of their choosing. For those who wished to be interviewed away from home, we paid for their transportation and meals. For the wider community, the research was framed in neutral terms—about negative migration experiences rather than trafficking—and given the normative nature of migration in Indonesia, this offered suitable camouflage. The research took place over a period of more than 2 years, and researchers were regularly in the communities and interacting with community members. We were therefore better able to understand and address how the research and our presence were understood in the community and, as such, to mitigate adverse effects of the research. And looking at the issue of reintegration through the lens of unidentified and unassisted trafficked persons provided a different picture of life after trafficking for victims and their families and over time across a range of issues.

5.2 Research with Victims' Families and Communities

Much trafficking research centres only on individual trafficking victims. Yet, trafficking impacts and is impacted by the victims' family members and community. We have conducted a number of studies that consider this wider social terrain, to understand the effects of trafficking on victims' children and family members and how the family situation and community setting affected trafficking victims. This meant understanding the experience and impact of trafficking not only from the victim's perspective but also from the perspective of different family members and within the wider community (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; Surtees, 2017a, 2018). This, however, is far from uncomplicated.

In one study in Moldova, we wanted to interview not only trafficking victims but also their families, friends and neighbours to explore reactions, perceptions and relations from different perspectives. However, we were also acutely aware that

trafficking for sexual exploitation was commonly seen as prostitution and highly stigmatised. Many victims had never disclosed their trafficking to even their closest family members and so there was no real opportunity to explore reintegration challenges from the perspective of victims' families, friends and neighbours. Given that this was a relatively short-term research project with only one round of fieldwork, we were also unable to follow-up after the research with respondents to assess any fallout from the study (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010, 2013). While in this case, we were concerned about stigma and discrimination from sexual exploitation, trafficking victims may suffer discrimination and stigma from family and community members for any number of reasons—failed migration, returning home without money, being detained and deported, needing help and being victimised and weak. Engaging family and community in research about human trafficking then may bring real risks and harm.

Including family members was also not possible in another study on the reintegration of mothers with children born from trafficking (Surtees, 2017d). In this case, it was necessary, for ethical reasons, to exclude children who were born into these trafficking experiences and the wider family. Most were too young to be ethically engaged in this research, and many did not know the circumstances of their birth. This raised important (and unresolvable) questions about whether and how to approach such complex and fraught issues with children of different ages given the risk of precipitating negative reactions and trauma and breaching privacy and confidentiality. It also varied as to what different family members had been told about the woman's experiences abroad and the circumstances of the pregnancy and/or birth, making interviews with family members complex and potentially risky and with potential implications for these children and mothers. As a result, findings were largely framed from the perspective of trafficked mothers, although interviews with service providers presented and rounded out other aspects of the children's experiences.

We were able to conduct research with victims' families, friends and neighbours in a longitudinal research project in Indonesia (Surtees, 2017b, c). The research project involved repeat interviews and ongoing communication with trafficking victims over more than two years. In this setting, it was possible, in some cases, to interview family members (spouses, parents, siblings, children, grandparents, extended family and in-laws) to learn about how they experienced and coped with their loved one's absence while trafficked and their recovery and reintegration. We also interviewed friends and neighbours about their experiences and assessment of the victim's reintegration after trafficking including interactions with friends, neighbours and community members.

These interviews were approached carefully, only after having completed a first-round interview with the victim respondent, which allowed us to assess the appropriateness and advisability of interacting with their family members or friends and with the victim's full knowledge and informed consent. In some cases, we opted not to interview a family member or a friend because of concerns that this might cause problems for the victim. In other cases, the victim expressly declined to involve their family or friends in the research.

Engaging with victims' families and friends yielded more holistic but also layered information about their lives after trafficking. One woman, trafficked as a domestic worker to the Middle East, was very ill on return, unable to work and without any means of support. She was both physically and mentally unwell and, as a widow, had limited means of support. She was also struggling with her children's feelings and reactions, as her eldest son explained: "The challenge was to rebuild this family again because it has been a long time [since we were happy]." Each child was suffering in different ways and for different reasons. Her eldest son was grieving the death of his father, including that this led their mother to work abroad; his siblings were jealous that they, as small children, had not enjoyed the happy family times that he had; and he was angry at his mother for what he perceived as abandonment. His youngest brother, then a teenager, was missing school and misbehaving in the community but would not listen to his mother, as she had not been there to raise him when he was a boy. The hurt on all sides was tremendous and understanding all of these feelings was key to reintegration, as the mother explained: "... [the youngest boy] said this to me, 'Why you do not take care of me, mother?' How can [he say] I did not take care of him? He knew that I left him for working abroad. I left him so that he can eat and continue go to school. Until one day my eldest son came to me to discuss about that. [...] My son told me, 'We did not need your money, we needed your attention'".

6 The Impact of Research on Researchers

Research on trafficking in persons can be a sensitive subject, but it need not always be, or more precisely, it is not necessarily all that much more sensitive than research with other groups, be they classified as vulnerable or not. As we pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, when the research aims to improve interventions, very often the most relevant issues will not be related to trafficking itself but to socio-economic realities of previously trafficked persons' current lives. As such, many questions and lines of inquiry are not likely to be relevant or even appropriate. Indeed, as a general rule, researchers should carefully consider if and when it is necessary to ask questions about trafficking itself and traumatising experiences that individuals have endured. In some studies, it may be necessary to approach such issues (with the respondents' full and informed consent). Sometimes it is necessary to discuss topics of violence and abuse and some respondents may also want to talk about what has happened to them in some detail even if questions about this are not asked. But in many cases, it is not necessary or even advisable.

This is not to say that research that seeks to understand current vulnerabilities, assistance needs and life after trafficking is not in itself potentially distressing and stressful. We have found this particularly to be the case when conducting research in very poor contexts where assistance options were rudimentary and sometimes non-existent. For example, seeing very young children of young and vulnerable mothers living in ramshackle, unheated and unsafe dwellings and with little

prospect of substantial improvements has had a profound emotional impact. Knowing that victims face stigma and discrimination and even violence in their home communities as they try to recover and reintegrate after trafficking has also been deeply distressing. Speaking with victims in low-resourced countries who are unable to find durable solutions in their lives and for their families has been consistently painful and stressful, especially cumulatively over time.

Conducting in-depth interviews with trafficking victims can be an emotional and even taxing experience. Much advice and many good recommendations have been developed about how to sensitively handle, prepare for and process emotionally taxing interviews. This includes making sure that researchers have the necessary skills and training in trauma-informed interviewing and developing strategies for risk assessments and the handling of risks (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Establishing routines for researchers to check in with supervisors at regular points and having plans for debriefs or just a chance to talk informally about emotional reactions with friends or colleagues can also be helpful (Kelly & Coy, 2016). For many of our studies, we have had the fortune of conducting fieldwork and analysis together and we have spent many hours discussing the lives and experiences of respondents, both as part of analysis and also over the years as we have continued to reflect and analyse these interviews and interactions. This has clearly helped us process some of our more difficult interviews and interactions and speaks to the value of having a trusted research partner who shares the same experiences and memories.

Seeing someone suffer and not be able to help is difficult for most people, and we have found this challenging and draining. Researchers are often not in a position to offer help or intervene beyond referring to existing assistance options, which may not always be of a high standard or even readily available, as previously mentioned. In fact, intervening can sometimes cause harm when researchers are not qualified to make good judgements as to what an individual needs and how to refer a victim or offer assistance in a specific situation. Inappropriate intervention can also undermine the efforts of existing assistance providers and create false expectations about what outsiders, like researchers, can offer. All of these issues can translate into researchers' feelings of distress and helplessness.

Ultimately, for us, what has been the most important factor in processing and dealing with emotionally painful interviews and interactions with respondents, has been whether we have felt that the research is meaningful. This echoes what many of our respondents have told us about their experience of being interviewed: It may sometimes be difficult and stressful, but simultaneously meaningful when it contributes to better policy and practice. Making meaning of a horrible and harrowing experience can be a joint motivation for researchers and participants, which can mitigate risk for both parties (Brunovskis, 2012). We have been fortunate in our work to have built strong working relationships with organisations and institutions working on the frontline of the anti-trafficking response in different countries. We have been able to share—formally and informally, through published works and during conversations and discussions—learnings and findings from our research and to discuss how to translate this research into actions and interventions. Some of

our research has been conducted specifically to analyse and understand issues and challenges that our practitioner colleagues have shared with us in their efforts to improve their work. We have also over the years, in addition to academic publishing, created materials that are accessible to and designed specifically for use by practitioners.

The flip side of this is that sensitive research can be particularly challenging for early career researchers, or researchers who are new to sensitive research. When first exposed to some of the more extreme aspects of human trafficking experiences, it can be unsettling and even challenge one's sense of meaning and general worldview. This means that the emotional impact can be higher in early research. At the same time, early career researchers may have fewer channels to make sure that their research is heard and seen and reaches those who make decisions, which are ways to contribute towards meaning. It is therefore particularly important to make sure that researchers who are starting out in sensitive research have appropriate support, training, supervision and outlets for sharing their learning.

We do feel that it is important to distinguish between different levels or types of discomfort or pain for researchers undertaking sensitive research. Not all pain is harmful, and not all pain is bad. Sensitive research can cause pain and certainly our research has, often and sometimes very deeply, caused us pain. Seeing and hearing about suffering on an ongoing basis and not being able to help does have an emotional impact on us. But in some ways, these interviews are painful precisely because they feel important and meaningful: They present us with aspects of human vulnerability, exploitation and suffering that need thorough and empirical research in order to be addressed in helpful and effective ways. Those who suffer exploitation are also often not in a position to be heard on their own, for many reasons, including social exclusion, stigma, fear, discomfort and lack of resources. As such, one way to make sense of the distress we may feel as researchers is to make our research count in alleviating human suffering and recognise our role as cogs in a larger wheel working towards the same end. One project or even 20+ years of research is not in itself going to change the world, but it can contribute to developing useful knowledge and better-informed policies and practices that reach and influence practitioners and policymakers.

This is not to say that all emotional risks for researchers can be mitigated by finding meaning or making our research count or by working in a positive research partnership and with supportive practitioners. For instance, if interviews turn into intrusive memories, images and thoughts that do not abate within a reasonable amount of time, this is a clear sign to seek help. Other issues to be aware of are avoidance or a diminishing ability to empathise with respondents, which can be warning signs of unhelpful coping strategies and compassion fatigue. It is important to be aware of the risk of distress, emotional overload or vicarious trauma and, in such cases, take the necessary steps to protect oneself and seek the necessary support. It is also important that research bodies increasingly implement measures to support researchers or alleviate these situations. However, to date this has been largely left to individual researchers to manage and cope with.

7 Conclusion

Over our years of research, we have seen substantial improvements in how trafficking research is conducted. A significant shift has been the recognition that trafficking victims must be involved in this research, to speak for themselves and to share their assessment of anti-trafficking interventions. This is key not only to our enhanced understanding of trafficking but also to what is needed to prevent and redress it. This must be done carefully and ethically but also with methodological robustness. Each research study is fraught with methodological issues and ethical concerns, which can differ substantially from project to project, location to location but also among respondents within the same study.

There are challenges and limitations in how trafficking research is done and what we know as a result. The collective knowledge base is clearly affected by shared methodological and ethical challenges. We have previously pointed out that one challenge for knowledge development on human trafficking generally lies not necessarily (or always) within individual research projects, which may be candid about their limitations — unrepresentative samples, constrained access to respondents and so on. The problem is perhaps more related to the cumulative impact of these shared challenges when the research field is replete with similar studies, similar methods and, thus, similar findings (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010). Trafficking research must be read with an awareness of and attention to these biases and limitations, which can limit our understanding of the issue and impact responsive policy and practice to varying degrees. It is therefore the responsibility of researchers to be clear not only about limitations of any one study but also to avoid overstating or simplifying findings or generalising beyond what can be concluded.

We ourselves have faced and navigated a range of these challenges and limitations over the course of many research projects—some of which we were able to address and some of which required rethinking how the research could be done. How we would have liked to approach a study was not always methodologically, practically or ethically possible. It is not without reason that several of our joint and separate publications (including this chapter) have focused explicitly on methodological and ethical challenges in human trafficking research (see, for instance, Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; Surtees & Brunovskis, 2016; Surtees et al., 2019). Trying to sort through some of these issues and engaging in discussion with others has been an integral part of our overarching approach across the research projects that we have conducted on this complex but important issue. It has also been a touchstone in developing and executing new research projects over the years as we aim to contribute to knowledge and learning that can improve the lives of trafficking victims and their families.

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Chapter 15

How to Do Criminological Research on, for, and with Children and Young People



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1 Children and Young People as the Subject of Research in Criminology

A large part of criminological research has focused on youth samples. In certain cases, because the topic requires it, it is important to look to establish how youths engage in delinquency and also how they desist from crime. In other cases, the reasons are far more mundane, being related to opportunity and ease of access to large samples of children and young people in schools.¹ In this regard, it is worth recognizing that youths—together with prisoners—represent the *captive*² populations with which researchers in criminology have typically worked, occasionally in an almost excessive way.

Although the scientific community has constantly generated results through research conducted with young participants, critical voices have been increasingly raised as regard possible abuses and ethical dilemmas involved in research with children and young people (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Calls have been made to

¹In this chapter, the terms children, minors, adolescents, and young people shall be used interchangeably to refer to participants under the age of 18. When reference is made to research on offenders and according to the age–delinquency curve we refer to children over 12 years of age, who are in the adolescent stage. When reference is made to victims, they may be younger, so we have opted to use the terms children and minors.

²Prisoners, students, and soldiers are considered *captive* populations. For different reasons their individual autonomy is limited, and therefore, their capacity for voluntary consent may be compromised (Bonham & Moreno, 2008)

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respect the rights of children in the research process and the need to respect the right of a child to be properly researched; much remains to be done (Beazley et al., 2009). Criticism has been leveled at the lack of specialized children's research knowledge in the scientific community and even ethics review boards' membership. Ethical research with children requires knowledge and skills not only for researchers but also for other members of the research team, but unfortunately to date support mechanisms (like guides, training programs, and forums) are lacking. In this regard, the project known as ERIC,³ *Ethical Research Involving Children*, is worth noting. The objective of this project is to help researchers understand the meaning of planning and conducting ethical research involving children in diverse geographical, social, cultural, or methodological contexts.

As *ERIC* project claims, general principles of research ethics (autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice) must be revisited to develop rights-based research with children and juveniles. This means that, in view of the inequality of power that exists between the researcher and the participants, the dignity of children and young people must be scrupulously respected. Furthermore, the objective is for participation in research to always be a positive experience for children and young people. On the one hand, it is the researcher's obligation to avoid any harm or damage that the research, either through acts of commission or omission, might generate, and, on the other hand, research should promote the well-being of the children as a general intention of any scientific purpose. Science should help improve the lives of children and young people.

For many years, our research group has studied young offenders. We have done so, using both quantitative and qualitative methodology and applying techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, and courtroom observations. Along this time, we have faced many ethical challenges that we share in this chapter.

2 Ethical and Emotional Issues in Research Design with Children and Young People

Bearing in mind the above, great care should be taken in research design, opting always for designs and techniques that are the least invasive. Here lies one of the first dilemmas to be clarified, namely, is it preferable to avoid the participation of children or should it be fostered? Researchers are yet to come to an agreement. Some argue that if secondary data can be used (if such data are compiled as per ethical principles) so much the better. If the data already exist, children would not need to participate and interference in their lives would be avoided (Morrow et al., 2014). Elsewhere, others believe that "good science" related to children requires their voices to be heard and allowing their experiences and perspectives to be incorporated into the research increases the value and validity of the findings (James, 2007).

³<https://childethics.com/>

They argue that information obtained from children can contribute to strengthening laws, policies, and practices that further their human dignity, rights, and well-being (Powell et al., 2013). Involving children in research ensures their right to participate in matters that affect them, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter CRCh).

In this debate, it is important to remember that research design must be guided by the objectives of the study. If it seeks to describe, for example, children who are serving judicial sentences, the information available on record may be sufficient. If, however, the objective is to ascertain the children's view of their experience of the justice system, interviews or surveys are unavoidable. In fact, in the field of juvenile justice, the recent trend toward fostering their participation has contributed to advancing knowledge as regards the functioning of the juvenile justice system (Arndorfer et al., 2015, Fernández-Molina et al., 2018, Papadopoulos & Van Buggenhout, 2020, Rap, 2013) and has even influenced the developed of juvenile criminal policy. A prime example of the latter is the ambitious project launched, in 2010 by the Council of Europe and led by Professor Kilkelly, under which almost 4000 children from 25 countries were consulted about their experiences with the courts, and which resulted in the Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Child-Friendly Justice (Kilkelly, 2010). Our research group has studied the juvenile justice system from the perspective of juvenile offenders. We have explored many different techniques for capturing the youngsters' voices, but it was not an easy road. For instance, it is difficult for children and adolescents to talk about hard experiences with adult strangers. In addition, we have realized that we have sometimes focused on issues that are important to us but not at all to them, which has led us to reflect on the need to provide a safe space that invites dialogue. Also, we tried to adapt our interview techniques in order to help juvenile offenders to distance themselves from their harsh experiences (see Sect. 2.2).

2.1 Research Phases

All scientific literature on the subject coincides in that researchers must first and foremost avoid causing harm to the child (Powell et al., 2013). This requires the constant exercise of reflection to assess the possible harm the research may cause to the children, given that causing harm is easier than it might seem. On the one hand, this is because the harm caused is not always evident, because our scientific desires may blind one to see what we would otherwise perceive without difficulty. The lenses through which the researcher looks can distort what he or she sees, and, unintentionally, the research may cause harm to the child. On some occasions, it is the "adult-centric" vision (Barley & Russell, 2019, Bernuz, 2019), which prevents one from seeing, understanding, or grasping the harm that our research can cause. To avoid this, we try to learn from our participants by encouraging them to provide us with their feedback. For example, in one research on accessible language during the criminal procedure a teenager expressed his disagreement about how intrusive the

juvenile criminal process seemed to him. In particular, he was critical about needing to be interviewed by a psychologist due to his committing an offense. Thus, by listening to their views of the system, we have learned much useful information for our research. On other occasions, it is our ethnocentric lens, which will not allow us to look beyond what is right in front of us. Thus, children from different cultural backgrounds may be harmed if we are insensitive to questions that may generate distress, even if these may seem irrelevant to the researcher. In our research, we have also noted young migrants' specific needs. For example, unaccompanied foreign minors need, first of all, to share their story—especially, their journey to Spain—their feelings, and their view of how the migration journey affected them. Finally, it will be the lens of science that may cloud the researcher's good work. The purpose that every good scientist has always when starting a research project can lead to justifying or underestimating the collateral damage caused by their work.

Although the objective of avoiding harm must be considered particularly when designing our research, it must not then be neglected while the study is conducted. Particularly relevant is how young participants are recruited and how we negotiate the conditions under which their participation in the research is undertaken. Furthermore, once the fieldwork has commenced, care should be taken to ensure that participation in the research does not expose the child to harm. However, well-intentioned the research may be, we should always be aware that it may serve to focus attention on an individual and generate a stigma that is difficult to overcome. Accordingly, during fieldwork, it is important to be discreet in how we carry out the research to avoid identifying the children and young people in their community of reference (home, school, peer group, neighborhood), etc. All collaborators (field workers) must be appropriately trained so that neither their behavior nor their words reveal the identity of the children the subjects investigated and the information they may have provided. Similarly, great care is required with the information compiled and stored. In our research group, we invest time in this training, especially with young researchers, and try to keep a permanent space for reflection. Sometimes, however, it is not obvious what needs to be done.

Finally, avoiding harming children also requires particular sensitivity during the dissemination of findings. Firstly, young participants deserve to be appropriately informed as regards the findings. Researchers often neglect to disclose their findings precisely to the participants, who may then feel used or disrespected. Secondly, dissemination may once again put participants in the spotlight, against their wishes. In this phase, researchers should again engage in a process of reflection to decide on the way to report the information. Researchers face two challenges here. One is to continue protecting the anonymity of the children and young people in this public phase of the research. On many occasions, when presenting findings, it is easier than it seems to disclose the identity of participants and disclose what we were told in an environment of confidentiality. For this reason, it is advisable to make a detailed reading of what is reported, checking that the information provided does not enable the person who said it to be identified. The second challenge is much more complex and concerns the difficulty of translating and interpreting, as adults, the voices and ideas of children have conveyed to us as regards how they perceive, experience, and

interpret the world (Bernuz, 2019). As Spyrou says (2011, p. 156) “an adult can never become a ‘native’ in children’s worlds,” and it is thus possible that “what children say might be taken to mean what the researcher understands rather than what the children mean.” This risk not only causes harm by prioritizing the children’s voices that coincide with the interests of adult researchers and ignoring those that do not (James, 2007), but also affects the validity of the results obtained, and in short, how we engage in science *on* and *with* minors.

2.2 *Techniques Employed*

Regarding the techniques, researchers appreciate issues of validity and reliability, opportunity, or even innovation, leaving the ethical implications of its use in second place. In a large variety of criminological studies, self-report surveys (SRSs) are almost ubiquitous to measure delinquency, victimization, and etiological factors. Extensive experience in their use has corroborated their validity and reliability. Almost, SRSs are simple to administer to young people. A very little explored aspect is the length of the SRS. There is agreement that SRSs should be as short as possible, but it is rare to find studies in which the authors clarify whether the time and effort spent by young people in completing the questionnaire were considered. In our experience and that of other researchers, SRSs are very boring for young people. In fact, young people often ask before agreeing to participate: *How many questions are there?* In certain studies, young people had to spend 90 min completing SRS or to do so in two 45-min sessions; excessively long considering that participants prefer less than 30-minute-long surveys (Revilla & Höhne, 2020). Furthermore, the expected duration of their participation does not always appear in the informed consent, which means that young people do not really know what they are committing to. From conversations with other researchers, it is perceived that the collaboration of young people is very often achieved by using captive populations, either at school, foster care, or custody centers. To recruit captive populations is a useful strategy as it allows us to access large samples of young people and compile information in a short period of time. Moreover, captive youths are motivated to participate to relieve boredom or daily routine (Grégoire & Mathys, 2023), but taking advantage of their “captivity” to burden participants with onerous surveys is a questionable research practice.

To the best of our knowledge, however, there are few methodological studies as regards the impact of boredom, fatigue, or frustration on children completing SRS. Neither is it common for researchers to share their thoughts on how such situations have been addressed in their work, despite the effect this may have on the responses. Enzman (2013) compared responses to two versions of the Second

International Self-Reported Study (ISRD2⁴), in the respective long and short versions. Their results showed that the recognition of having committed antisocial behavior was lower in the longer version of the ISRD, as young people stop answering affirmatively to these questions to avoid having to answer the follow-up items. Le et al. (2021) also found that drug surveys with extensive follow-up questions may lead to respondent fatigue and then there is a higher probability of lower-quality responses. In both cases, the respondents most affected by fatigue were, precisely, those most involved in delinquency or drug use.

If young people generally find completing SRS boring, for some of the juveniles the process can be especially frustrating: those with reading difficulties, learning difficulties, with limited vocabulary, and those that are particularly impulsive. For example, when the ISRD3 was conducted, we found that the most economically disadvantaged children took significantly longer than others to complete the questionnaire. Ideally, no child should take more than 30–45 min (the length of a regular class), and instruments should be designed so that those with fewer skills can complete the questionnaire in that time.

To achieve this, not only must the length of the SRS be limited, but researchers must ensure that the questions are easy to read, understand, and answer. In our experience, we have learned the importance of conducting cognitive interviews to ensure it is understood by any children. Furthermore, these cognitive interviews yield substantial feedback on the children's vision of the issue under study and help us prepare to resolve doubts during data collection. For example, for some young people the expression face-to-face ("*cara a cara*" in Spanish) has a confrontational connotation; for others, video calls and video chats are face-to-face interactions. So, it is necessary to clarify that it refers to "in person" or "off-line." Therefore, the use of very long surveys is not only questionable as it does not take into consideration how young people feel, but also because fatigue and boredom that SRS produces reduce the quality of the data.

Another technique widely used with children is that of biographical interviews, whether semi-structured interviews, life stories, narrative interviews, or other formats. Biographical interviews enable obtaining a wealth of information about the experiences of young people, their perceptions, concerns, and interests, needs, or demands. In our experience, young people are more motivated to participate in interviews than in SRS (see also, Grégoire & Mathys, 2023). However, interviews about adverse experiences (mistreatment, abuse, neglect, etc.), have a high emotional impact on the young participants. In relation to this emotional impact, we are interested in this section to reflect on two questions: how far we should explore such interviews and how to ensure they have a lesser emotional impact.

It is easy when conducting biographical interviews to be tempted to delve into all possible experiences or events that have occurred in the young people's lives.

⁴The International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD) is an international collaborative study on delinquency, victimization, and substance use. Three sweeps were conducted in 1991–1992 (ISRD1), 2006–2008 (ISRD2), and 2012–2019 (ISRD3). More information is available at <https://isrdstudy.org>

Interviewing children evidently includes actively listening to what they need to narrate or bring to light. But listening to their voices is different, however, from researchers being driven by the desire to learn about all the events that have occurred in a child's life. One thing we have learned is that it is not necessary to gather all the information possible to give meaning to their experience. We agree with Øverlien and Holt (2021) that ethical and skillful research elicits children's viewpoints or the events that are most meaningful to them. If we truly consider children as full-fledged participants in our research, and understand they help improve our understanding of an issue that directly affects them, then they should be treated as "experts on their own lives," who are able to choose the events or lived experiences that are most important in understanding their paths in life, decisions, and motivations (Barriage, 2021).

Furthermore, interviews allow us to collect information with a deeper, more emotional content than in surveys, but this also entails a risk. On the one hand, interviews may be painful for children by having to relive hurtful situations; on the other hand, their experiences of victimization or mistreatment by adults may hinder their verbalization of what occurred, or the harm suffered (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020). Accordingly, there has been a move toward designing narrative interviews in which children can distance themselves from the events they narrate, telling them, for example, as if they were scenes from films in which they are the directors (Canter & Youngs, 2015). Another advantage of these narrative techniques is that they break away from the tendency of young people to recite the stories they have frequently heard the authorities or professionals talk about them (Lems, 2020).

Likewise, to foster the children's active participation in the research, giving them the opportunity to contribute to knowledge and offer them greater control (power) over their participation, other less common, but equally interesting, methods can be used, such as visual methods (including drawings, visual calendars, photographs, vignettes) and digital techniques such as those they use in their own social networks (Glegg, 2019). For example, that young people record themselves talking about their adverse experiences without the presence of researchers is a discreet and respectful process. Researchers have reported that these methods could motivate children and young people to construct meanings and narratives "in the most unexpected and delightful ways" (Barley & Russell, 2018). In this regard, a particularly positive aspect of these methods is that they can be used both to collect information and to allow minors to offer interpretations that enrich the analysis of researchers.

Both interviews and visual methods can be used individually or in a group format. Group techniques should not be used as a quick way to obtain information from several young people, but rather when it is estimated that the group discussion can provide relevant information on the subject. Even when it is the ideal strategy to attain an objective, it should always be assessed whether the young person benefits from group participation. For example, young people in custodial or out-of-home care already participate or have participated in many group activities, which include talking about their own experiences, and thus may benefit from the use of individual interviews (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020). Likewise, special care should be taken not to generate situations that could be harmful. For this reason, groups should

be created for different profiles (i.e., aggressors and victims) or the group conversation should refer to perceptions, opinions, or explanations about a topic, but not to personal experiences. In all cases, it is worth considering that gender can impact group dynamics and that mixed-sex groups may be inappropriate when studying antisocial or criminal behaviors in young people. For groups to be safe spaces, researchers must be very attentive to interactions to manage or suspend the activity if distress is observed in any of the participants.

Compared to these techniques that involve the children in the research process and given the role of experts, observation places young people in a less empowering position, given that it is an example of research on children rather than with children. Observation, however, may be necessary if we wish to learn how young people interact with others, especially with adults: how they deal with complex situations, such as a trial, or how adults treat these youths at different points of the judicial process (Fernández-Molina et al., 2021, Rap, 2013).

Finally, we wish to underline that research *with* children must necessarily be flexible and creative and must opt for mixed designs that allow each child to participate in the way they find most appropriate and comfortable. This was the approach taken by the Council of Europe's aforementioned project on child-friendly justice. In that project, as well as the standard administration of a survey, participants' children were also invited to communicate their views about the justice system in other ways, for example, by sending in photographs and pictures. Also, children-aid organizations were invited to use this survey as the basis for discussions (individual and group) with children on their experiences of the justice system (Kilkelly, 2010). This is a good example of how research with children that allows them to decide how they wish to participate is not only ethical, but also contributes to scientific knowledge and improved professional practices.

3 Ethical Aspects in Practice

Research with children requires constant review of ethical considerations. This attention to ethical details must be even greater when a participant is a person involved in criminal proceedings and who therefore presents a situation of greater vulnerability due to the deprivation of rights that he or she already faces. Since social science research ethics committees have only recently been developed in Spain, scarce reflection has been given to the challenges involved in, for example, social research with children. In our group, for years we had to submit our projects to clinical research committees. These committees approved our request but rarely resolved our concerns about how to proceed in our research involving children or young people. Our resource has always been to reflect and debate with national and international researchers with great expertise in both the field of juveniles and ethical research. This section examines the primary ethical considerations researchers must focus on, not so much when they "think about" their research but when they

“execute” it. The rules of the game are, in fact, only two: No child must be obliged to participate in research and, if participating, the anonymity and the confidentiality of everything they share will be respected. Despite the apparent simplicity, it is the researcher’s use of these rules that is the most challenging part in safeguarding ethical research with children, as we shall see.

3.1 *Free Participation*

Ensuring free participation in research is no great mystery; the researcher need only obtain the consent of the participant. Drawing on Gallagher (2009), we consider that for consent to be valid in research with children, it must be an act that is (i) personal, (ii) explicit, (iii) informed and conscious, and (iv) voluntary and renegotiable.

Personal In research with children, the general rule has been to obtain the informed consent of parents exclusively, insofar as children are perceived lack of competence and the obligation of parents as guardians to safeguard their children’s well-being. However, those that have experience in the area, especially in research with older children (>12 years), will have realized that obtaining only paternal consent is not sufficient. They will more than likely have found that, during the fieldwork, it is necessary to informally renegotiate with the children or it will result in their refusal to participate, as they do not consider it legitimate for others to have given their approval on their behalf. Accordingly, to ensure their right to make decisions as regards matters that affect them, as CRCh recognized, the general rule to be reversed; that is, consent should first be obtained from the young participants (Gallagher, 2009). For this reason, before the researcher commences the interview, often alone, even though their parents or guardians provide consent, we have always asked our participants if they wished to participate in the study, even if this meant the loss of participants. Moreover, there are some situations whereby it may be inappropriate to seek parental consent, especially when it can involve confidentiality, for example, in studies concerning sexuality or drug use (Powell et al., 2013) or domestic violence. Our advice is to work with participants who are legally able to give consent for themselves. The threshold fixed in Spain is 14 years of age.

Explicit For consent to be explicit, there should be proof that approval to take part in the research has actually been given. This commonly means that permission is given in a written document, serving this as physical evidence that can be retained if it is necessary to substantiate consent. In research with children, they may fail to understand or be intimidated if an unfamiliar adult requires them to sign a document. Therefore, there is a need to be creative and seek alternatives (e.g., using witnesses, recording oral consent) in which non-written agreement can be proven. In our experience, the participants consider it too formal to have to sign a document and when given the opportunity, oral consent is preferred which is recorded in an audio file, which we store on secure servers (Fernández-Molina & Bartolomé, 2022).

Informed and Conscious It has been found that children sometimes do not fully understand what they are agreeing to and the scope of their decision (Ennew & Plateau, 2004). Accordingly, they must be informed of all relevant aspects of the research and in a way that is readily accessible and easily understood. Therefore, (i) they should understand the topic and the purpose of the research (What are we going to do and why?); (ii) what their participation involves (What do they have to do?), providing details of the place and time involved (How is it going to be done?); and (iii) information must be given on the possible risks and benefits the research has identified (What will happen if I participate?). In this case, honesty is paramount, and much care must be taken not to gloss over the situation. For example, we have learned that it is necessary to warn participants about the emotional impact of their participation and to provide information on support services if necessary.

The possibility of compensating participants should also be considered. While there is no doubt as regards financial compensation as reimbursement for expenses incurred (such as transport, meals, or accommodation), or as compensation for lost time, work, and effort that the research may generate, and even as recognition for the work done once the research is completed, there are occasions in which compensation is offered as an incentive to participate. Here, there the ethical dilemma arises as to whether such incentives cover up an attempt to coerce the minors for consent. In our experience, compensation means facing serious ethical challenges. Sometimes it has been considered appropriate to compensate them for their time or as a way of encouraging participation; we have always done so with gift cards from a sports shop to avoid that our young participant can purchase products that are potentially a risk to their health, i.e., legal or illegal drugs. On one occasion when conducting research with juvenile foreigners in a custodial center, we could not, as planned, offer compensation (gift card) as a situation of inequality arose with the rest of the juvenile inmates who were not participants (Fernández-Molina et al., 2017). Finally, on another occasion of research regarding police custody (Fernández-Molina & Montero, 2022), certain juvenile participants postponed interviews demanding more money. We refuse this negotiation (20€ was our limit), despite the great interest in obtaining their testimony. Although these compensations may seem odd to university managers, there are sufficient mechanisms to finance them by research grants.

Voluntary and Renegotiable The recognized disparity in power between the researcher–adult and the participant–minor is what may lead to participation not being accepted in a wholly independent manner. Thus, and again to avoid causing harm, researchers must respect any decision not to participate, even if the reasons put forward seem neither comprehensible nor reasonable. Sometimes, juveniles who were initially willing to participate in any of our research have declined at the last minute. On occasions, we have not been able to carry out interviews for which we have traveled 200 km, and it is important to assume that these things can happen.

Especially sensitive is the issue of obtaining free consent when the children are recruited from institutions; in these cases, the ethical responsibility shifts from the

researchers to the gatekeepers. Although the responsibility for the children and information inevitably falls on the gatekeepers, the researcher must be especially diligent to ensure that the recruitment process has been fairly conducted, both for questions of bias that could affect the research quality and for ethical questions that might lead to the voices of certain groups of children not being heard. A good example of the difficulty in obtaining access to unaccompanied minors is when child welfare services responsible for their guardianship do not always grant permission for them to take part in research (see the research of Chase et al., 2019). To reach this vulnerable group of underage unaccompanied minors, we had to recruit overage participants and ascertain retrospectively their judicial experience when they were younger. This was because the Spanish welfare services did not want to recognize that there might be some young foreigners who have gone through the juvenile justice system as an offender (Fernández-Molina et al., 2017).

A further common ethical dilemma that arises in research with participants is related to covert observation. This refers to cases in which due to the subject of research and in order not to distort the validity of the findings, neither the true nature of the researcher and/or their purposes can be revealed. The question here is to what extent the objective of the research is so important that it justifies the deceit and instrumentalization of others (Corbetta, 2007), and, in our case, what justifies an adult deceiving a minor, especially when their well-being is jeopardized. The researcher conducting the covert research should always protect the interests of the child and seek consent after the observation is completed. It is a risky technique that we have never used, but the use of ethnographic research with young people, i.e., hooligans, youth gangs, is quite common in criminological research. We recommend the toolkit developed by Roulet et al. (2017) for challenges relating to consent in covert research.

Finally, given that children and adolescents are immersed in a rapid, continuous process of evolution, during the lengthy research and longitudinal studies, their participation must be renegotiated. It is essential that the children do not feel forced by an agreement they gave under certain conditions, which might have changed, or because, during the process, they find they have changed their minds and are no longer willing to participate. At each new interview, space should be devoted to asking young participants whether they want to continue sharing information. Likewise, should proceed in longer interviews, especially when there are signs of fatigue or discomfort.

3.2 Ensuring Anonymity and Confidentiality: Neither So Simple Nor So Obvious

To ensure children and young people are unharmed, it is pivotal to maintain anonymity and confidentiality and that their participation in the research does not disclose a situation and/or circumstances that they do not wish to reveal. This means

the researcher must respect and protect the information provided with the utmost care, ensuring that other people, including their parents, are unaware of what has been narrated or the material shown. This is even more crucial when research is conducted with young offenders, given the stigma this can generate.

We should be sensitive to what is important for children to keep private, always giving precedence to their wishes. It is a matter of respecting their rights. In only one case is it necessary to override their desire for privacy and that is when an individual's physical integrity is at stake. There are two likely scenarios here: (i) that the minors are a victim of abuse or mistreatment, and/or (ii) it is the minors that are causing harm to themselves or someone. In both cases, a conflict arises, given that either the physical integrity of a person is at stake, or the confidentiality agreement is being breached. The interests at play should lead the researchers to notify the authorities about what is happening, as the protection of individuals must always prevail. The procedure, however, requires the utmost prudence to avoid the allegation stigmatizing the minor (as either victim or aggressor). For this reason, although, before reporting the facts, it is desirable for the researcher to speak to the minor and explain the situation and what they plan to do, it is sometimes necessary to skip or delay this step, to avoid further exposure to harm.

In any event, it is convenient that the research design itself should define the procedure to be followed in such situations and the exceptional measures that will be adopted. It is also worth considering whether, given the circumstances under which the research will be implemented, it would be appropriate to clarify the limits of the confidentiality agreement in the consent form. In our studies, in sensitive research, we had to explain to young offenders that if any kind of abuse or harm is disclosed, in order to ensure their well-being, confidentiality may have to be breached (following Johnson et al., 2014). Sometimes, this might not be easy for young people to understand, and they may feel betrayed and leave the study, but researchers have a responsibility to report the abuse and support them so that they do not have to deal alone with the consequences of this disclosure.

This obligation to safeguard privacy evidently entails the entire research process, with a critical moment being the dissemination of findings and how this is undertaken. As discussed, it is essential for the researcher to be extremely circumspect when describing their findings so that it is impossible to associate the information disclosed with specific individuals. This can easily occur with young offenders in facilities or institutions where it is simple to surmise who may have conveyed specific information. Pseudonymization is the best way to prevent identification of the young participants as we can learn over the years. This requires careful management of personal data. Files containing personal information linked to young people's identification codes should be stored securely, as recommended by personal data protection regulations.

4 Emotional Work in Research with Children and Young People

As expressed in the latter section, researchers should be aware of the multiple emotions affecting children's decision-making in relation to their participation in the research. For example, a child or adolescent may feel forced to consent because they find it difficult to express their opinions, or because at one point they had said "yes," or to avoid disappointing their parents or a gatekeeper. The researcher must be vigilant of these situations, which a child may express through their behavior or non-verbal language (Powell et al., 2013) and, at the slightest hint of distress or practices of dissent (Kirby, 2020) must give the opportunity to leave, even if this means a painful loss of participants. For example, we ask if they are tired, or bored, or if they want to stop at the moment. In any case, before we started with the interviewing, we always explained to them their right not to participate and that there is no problem if they wanted to stop during the interview.

Second, young offenders have suffered harm and also caused harm, and may balk at talking about their experience, feel shame, and or have very intense reactions of distress or anger. The researchers must be extremely respectful during the data collection process, especially if using qualitative strategies. It is fundamental to provide participants with a safe space and time for communication, without interruptions or pressure, and without being rushed. Researchers should work on the skills required to create an atmosphere of trust, convey respectful interest, and engage in active listening: reading and listening to interviews and analyzing these is an efficient way to improve such skills. Important qualities include respecting silence without showing impatience; not interrupting; using, above all, open-ended questions that form a dialogue; and learning to share something with the young person that may facilitate this relationship, such as referring to a hobby or starting the conversation with a spot of humor. If grief, crying, or anger becomes apparent, or the child adopts a distant attitude, the researcher should show respect and stay calm, validating these emotions and offering the participant a break from the topic being discussed (for a guide, see Ritchie et al., 2013). It is important to remember that an ethical and respectful relationship between researcher and participant includes a proper exit (Morrison et al., 2012). For example, we are always grateful, we leave time for a small conversation, we ask if there is anything we can offer, we provide forms of contact (telephone, email, and work address), and we respond to their requests, if they contact us. Rarely have young people contacted us again, and when this happened, we have been asked for advice and orientation about services that could assist the participants. In these cases, we have helped them contact the specialized services.

In our experience, listening to the stories of young victims and offenders, engenders dismay, feelings of learned helplessness, concern for all of them, a sensation of helplessness, and even distrust in institutions and researchers. This may evidently affect the entire research procedure, and therefore, procedural meticulousness and reflexivity are essential. Ideally, various researchers should take part in the

collection, transcription, and analysis of the data; this may extend the distress within the entire team, but also allows the team to debrief and thereby act as a space for analysis and discussion and, in turn, as a resource for mutual care. In this regard, the emotions of the researchers should not be perceived as a risk to quality research, but rather as an inherent part of such research. The key lies in being aware of this and treating reflexivity not as an embellishment but rather as a source of information as regards the research process and a tool for self-care (Forhing, 2020). Sadly, some researchers have reported a long-term emotional impact deeper and damaging, especially in lengthy studies, which make it very difficult to say goodbye. In the most severe cases, there are symptoms typical of vicarious trauma (including intrusive thoughts, despair, or anxiety) and may require specialized mental health care, as mentioned above (Fohring, 2020; Moran & Asquith, 2020). Therefore, it would be necessary for the research institutions to have protocols and resources to deal with these potential risks. Unfortunately, in our institution there is no protocol, and it is not very usual in the Spanish scientific community. The mental health of researchers is largely overlooked, although there is growing concern to address the matter (e.g., <https://projects.tib.eu/remo/>).

Fortunately, criminological research with young also offers many rewards that help researchers remain devoted to their work: giving young people the opportunity to narrate their experiences, listening to their journey away from crime, identifying good practices, disseminating research to professionals, or designing tools that help safeguard rights like, in our case, the “*Hablemos Claro*” (*Let’s be clear*) project, which has been a source of great satisfaction and motivation.⁵

5 Lessons Learned

Criminological research with children and young people entails taking certain specificities into account, which may prolong and complicate the research. To conclude this chapter, we would like to highlight several aspects for continued ethical reflection and put forward certain proposals for good practices. These can be summarized in two main lessons to be learned: scientific research must involve the children, and research with children requires careful preparation.

Considering the first lesson learned, *treat the children and young people as experts on themselves*. At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed the importance of children participating in the research itself, as it is necessary for “exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children’s perspectives can provide” (James, 2007, p. 262). Our experience has

⁵*Let’s be clear* is a collection of accessible documents developed by our research group and directed at juveniles suspected of engaging in criminal behaviors who find themselves involved in judicial proceedings. The purpose is to help familiarise young offenders with the different procedural steps they will be exposed to and their rights at each stage. Further information in this link https://www.uclm.es/grupos/crimijov/transferencia/hablemos-claro?sc_lang=en

taught us that it is important to let them make decisions on what information to share and what events are particularly significant.

Recognizing Young People as Active Thinkers and as Experts of Other Young People Various authors have sought the participation of minors in all the phases of research design (see Lundy et al., 2011, Duarte et al., 2018 and Montreuil et al., 2021), guiding researchers on how to access participants or on the techniques that are best for data collection, providing interpretations of the information compiled, and suggesting practical recommendations or helping draw up versions of reports that children can understand. This way of working that is still relatively uncommon also reduces researcher bias and possible harm to the children concerned.

Returning the Research to the Children Concerned Researchers who apply strict ethical standards involve the children until the very end and do not forget them once they have got what they wanted from them. Therefore, it is essential to return the research to the young participants, devoting space and time to explain the results of their participation, and what we have learned from what we have been told. We should therefore do this in a way they can understand (Kay & Tisdall, 2009), using accessible tools such as computer graphics, digital animation, or short videos (Vaughn et al., 2013; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016). To capture the interest of young people, it would be interesting to use social media (Instagram, TikTok, etc.), as is already done for science education or for literacy health (Hayes et al., 2020; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). Thus, we are employing language and their channels of communication. In fact, as mentioned above, involving young people in co-producing material, reports, videos, TikTok, etc., to disseminate scientific information is not only useful but offers them an opportunity for social participation they have rarely had and can improve the dissemination of findings to wider audiences (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020).

The second lesson learned refers to careful preparation. To this end, it is considered important to underline the following aspects:

Researcher Training Researchers that work with young offenders should not only have a thorough knowledge of the area in question and of scientific methodology, but also of the ethical and emotional issues involved in this type of research. As mentioned above, in our group during pre-doctoral training we spend time on this, but always in an informal way or in small workshops, as there are few spaces in the scientific community to train young researchers in these matters.

Linguistically and Culturally Adapted Consent Forms Obtaining valid consent entails additional challenges in the case of children and young people. Accordingly, even greater effort should be made to explain the conditions of participation as honestly as possible, without glossing over the reality. To obtain informed and conscious consent, the researcher must draw up a document that is accessible as possible and is adapted to the specific age of the participants using, if necessary, symbols,

images, or audio-visual documents.⁶ The objective should be for children to be fully aware as to the purposes for which their permission is granted. Furthermore, it must be recognized that criminological researches often seek the participation of minors from ethnic minorities, and we should consider how a multicultural background can influence informed consent (Tham et al., 2022), as well as the logical barriers arising from language and limitations of understanding due to different linguistic uses, or those that arise from coming from a different culture and having limited knowledge of research practice; minorities may also have problems with the individualistic and independent vision of decision-making in the Western world. In other vulnerable ethnic groups, the legitimacy of a decision depends not only on a single person but involves the family or community they belong to.

Flexibility The most appropriate data collection technique depends on the objectives, but honesty and transparency are required when discussing this with children and young people (Chase et al., 2019), and imposition is to be avoided. This may entail using various techniques with different young people. The key is for the technique to allow the children and young people to share information that is relevant to the research. Evidently, just because something is innovative or creative, it is not necessarily good, and any innovation should be used carefully, with time being devoted to testing its validity and suitability. Techniques that appear to be highly attractive to some young people are not interesting to others. Furthermore, these are time-consuming (Wernesjö, 2014) or shift attention away from the research topic. Therefore, as the risk exists, researchers should constantly reflect on the method and effect produced. Currently, we are testing the “like a film” narrative technique (Canter & Youngs, 2015) with female offenders; we discovered that for some participants, this technique is not comfortable and does not facilitate the narration (Fernández-Molina et al., 2022).

Providing Children with a Safe and Trusting Environment Young participants should never feel intimidated or coerced. If they do, we have not behaved ethically, and the information compiled will not reflect the reality they have lived. This leads us to reflect on the spaces and places in which research is conducted, as these may influence the type of knowledge or experience that is accessed. As mentioned, criminological research is frequently conducted in schools and in institutionalized spaces (detention and/or custody facilities). In such places, confidentiality can be jeopardized by the difficulty of finding a private space and by the curiosity of others and the concern of gatekeepers (Graham et al., 2015). Furthermore, we should be aware that, in both types of spaces, adults enjoy natural positions of authority that might eventually influence the research (Jones, 2008). To that end, if we genuinely pursue the sincere and meaningful participation of children in our research, the guidelines of the Committee on the Rights of the Child must be adopted, which highlight the importance of having a context that inspires trust, so that minors can participate

⁶To see good practices in health context <http://iconsent.pilotvalidation.eu/en/teenagers-study/>

freely and, if necessary, arrange for someone that the young people trust to accompany them (i.e., a social worker, a priest, and an older peer).

Emotional Work Emotions are inherent in all human activity; rather than considering emotions a risk for scientific rigor, we can work with them as part of the research process, thereby achieving precisely greater meticulousness and transparency. Along these lines, emotional work has been proposed as an analytical tool that enables the entire research process to be examined. Researchers' emotional reactions influence their decisions and analyses, and such emotions are many: from the fear of not conducting a sufficiently impactful study to exposure to multiple traumatic stories, as well as the frustration of not finding enough participants, despite having thoroughly designed the work, or the anxiety caused by possibly inadequate data collection. Research reports rarely reflect on this issue, and the training and support provided to researchers working in sensitive areas fail to address the complexity of these reactions (Mallon & Elliot, 2019), which leaves researchers feeling helpless and undermines their work. In our experience, group reflection, above all, improves research and acts as a resource for mutual assistance and support, but few references exist to guide our emotional work. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature in this regard, in which researchers make their experience and learning available to others (Chase et al., 2019).

Finally, we would like to conclude on the need to report the ethical dilemmas faced in our research. Although we tend to report on the most important ethical issues, scientific publications do not allow physical space for reflection. For this reason, we appeal, and for us, it is also a pending task, to dedicate part of our time to report on the ethical challenges we face in our research in other kinds of journals or publications. This is not a common practice, but we believe it is the only way to move forward and promote a greater culture of ethics in scientific research.

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Chapter 16

Researching Imprisoned Persons: Views from Spain and Latin America



Cristina Güerri  and Marta Martí 

1 Introduction: Researching Imprisoned Persons

Empirical research in criminology poses many challenges, as the present book attests. This is especially true when researching vulnerable populations such as the group addressed in this chapter: imprisoned persons, who usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are subjected to the power of prison authorities. Research on imprisoned persons is characterised by the variety of topics and methodological approaches adopted by prison researchers.

The first studies on imprisonment were sociological accounts of life in prison and the inmate subcultures that flourished inside: *The Prison Community* (Clemmer, 1940) or *The Society of Captives* (Sykes, 1958). Later, the lives of imprisoned persons—rather than the prison as an institution—became the focus of attention of psychologists and criminologists. These scholars have explored diverse topics such as inmates' adaptation to imprisonment, prisoners' relationships with prison staff, prisoners' well-being, inmates' misconduct, the use of solitary confinement, the effectiveness of prison policy and rehabilitation programmes and the effects of imprisonment on recidivism (see, e.g. Johnson et al., 2016; Jewkes et al., 2016; Wooldredge & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, all these issues have also been studied focusing on the specific prisoner populations such as female, long-term, older or mentally ill prisoners, or through the lens of race.

Regarding methodological approaches, qualitative and, particularly, ethnographic enquiry have provided significant insights on the meanings and implications of imprisonment (e.g. Cunha, 2014; Drake et al., 2015). On this point, it has

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been highlighted that qualitative research is the most appropriate approach ‘*to make sense of the cultural, hierarchical, social and emotional dimensions of life ... in prison*’ (Beyens et al., 2015, p. 73).

On the other hand, quantitative approaches aimed at measuring, for example, prisoner psychosocial adaptation to imprisonment (Toch, 1977) or the *Quality of Prison Life* (Liebling, 2004) by means of surveys, questionnaires or structured interviews have also been relevant to our understanding of prisoners’ experiences. In this sense, quantitative, longitudinal studies are particularly important for unveiling the accumulative effects of imprisonment on prisoners’ lives and well-being, and on their future criminal behaviour (e.g. Dirkzwager et al., 2015).

Finally, it needs to be noted that although most research on prisoners has been developed by academics, convict criminologists have provided an invaluable contribution to the literature on imprisonment by combining personal experience with critical perspectives on penalty (Earle, 2016; see, for example, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*).

Besides the usual challenges of criminological research, carrying out such investigations has its own set of difficulties due to the very nature of the penitentiary institution—i.e. high security, thick bureaucracy, strict routine, lack of transparency—and the characteristics of the prisoner population—coming mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds and being subjected to the power of prison authorities. In fact, there is plenty of literature reflecting on the challenges and experiences of prison research (e.g. Beyens et al., 2015; Liebling, 1999; Liebling et al., 2021). However, to our knowledge, none specifically captures the realities of Spain and Latin America.

In this chapter, we use our experience conducting fieldwork inside prisons, mainly in Spain, but also in some countries of Latin America, to reflect upon the specific challenges and ethical dilemmas of researching imprisoned persons in our contexts, with the aim of adding a new perspective to the above-mentioned literature. More specifically, we have conducted more than 400 surveys and interviews, inside closed prisons and also outside them, with people in semi-freedom conditions and on parole. In these interviews we have explored inmates’ perception of the quality of prison life (Güerri & Alarcón, 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2018), the pains of open prisons (Martí, 2018, 2019) or the role of prison officers (Güerri, 2020). One of the authors has also conducted research in prisons in Latin America; specifically, the countries of Brazil, El Salvador and Mexico.¹

The chapter is structured in the following parts. First, we address the difficulties of gaining access to prisons and the main obstacles we may find when dealing with the different gatekeepers and a distrustful study population. Secondly, methodological challenges are explored, with a specific focus on conducting surveys and interviews with inmates. The third section discusses the ethical and emotional aspects of prison research. Finally, we reflect upon the lessons learned from conducting research with imprisoned persons inside prisons.

¹The studies in Latin America were done as consultancies for international organisations and are not published.

2 Conducting Fieldwork in Prison: A Constant Process of Negotiation

One of the challenging aspects of conducting research with imprisoned persons is accessing the field and getting prisoners' consent for their participation in the study, since there are many people who need to be convinced in successive stages. In fact, doing research in prison has been described as a 'constant process of negotiation' (Beyens et al., 2015, p. 68) in which we need to persuade several gatekeepers: first, we need to be authorised by the Prison Administration to access the prison; secondly, the specific details of in-site research will have to be negotiated informally with both prison management and prison officers and, finally, we need to gain the trust of prisoners.

2.1 *Accessing the Field: Obtaining the Authorisation of the Prison Administration*

Gaining access to the field is the first difficulty that we face when undertaking research on incarcerated people. Authorisation by the Prison Administration is required to enter a prison. Moreover, this authorisation also determines the degree of freedom that we will have to carry out our investigation, which becomes especially important in the case of qualitative approaches.

Obtaining permission to conduct research in prison is a rather challenging task. Depending on the jurisdiction or the political context, prison administrations may be more willing or more reluctant to grant access to researchers from the outside (González, 2012). For example, the opposition faced by Spanish researchers in the nineties (Ríos & Cabrera, 1998) contrasts with the ease of the process in Belgium (Beyens et al., 2015). Similarly, Wacquant (2002) denounced that the generous access granted to US prison sociologists until the seventies was withdrawn in the wake of the age of mass incarceration. In some Latin-American countries, it is difficult to know who to contact for authorisation and even then, there may not be any response or reason provided for rejection.

The main reasoning used by prison administrators for rejecting or imposing restrictions on researchers is security. The argument of security is frequently used in the prison context, from restricted access to activities and products—as King and McDermott's (1990) humorous anecdote on 'subversive geraniums' demonstrates—² to turning down visits of journalists or inmates' family members (Güerri et al., 2021). Thus, it is not surprising that we have faced difficulties such as being

²During their research programme, Kathleen McDermott wanted to give a geranium as a present to a prisoner. However, she was informed that it was against the rules—she could be introducing contraband. Then, she opted to present a sealed packet of seeds. Once the seeds grew, they attracted the attention of other inmates, who would assemble from time to time to watch the plant. This raised suspicion among the staff—what were they doing by the window?—who even reported the case to prison security, giving rise to 'the case of the subversive geraniums'.

prevented from entering with voice recorders (which stands in the way of conducting in-depth interviews) or that it has been suggested that we exclude high-security wings from our research—all in the name of security.

Moreover, our authorisation to access and spend time inside prison may be limited due to a lack of sufficient human resources to guide us through the institution and ensure our safety without disturbing prison routines (see also Field et al., 2019). We have also been denied access to inmates' files alleging data protection laws or, more recently, prevented from entering due to Covid-19.³

In addition, obtaining authorisation is usually a long process. First, the stipulated procedure to get the research project authorised requires sending a request detailing aspects such as the main objectives of the research, the methodology, the prison resources to be used, or the approval of the ethics committee of the research institution. Once the request is sent, the Prison Administration may take several months to respond, and then we may be asked to make adjustments that may require resending the request (see also Field et al., 2019).

A difficult, and even problematic, issue related to the need of an authorisation to enter the prison is finding the balance between the purpose of our research and the goals and limitations of the Prison Administration. For example, in Spain, where there is a considerable discursive emphasis in the constitutional goals of re-education and reintegration, we may find ourselves justifying our project to the administration in terms of rehabilitation, even when this is not the objective of our research. Similarly, in Canada, Hannah-Moffat explains that critical criminologists may have difficulties gaining entry to prisons as their research may be deemed 'insufficiently practical' or 'too political' (Hannah-Moffat, 2011, cit. in Kaufman, 2015).

2.2 Arriving to, Entering and Navigating the Field: Dealing with Prison Staff

Once authorisation is granted, we need to get to the prison where our research will be conducted. The first thing one realises is that getting to a prison requires a lot of time and resources because closed prisons are situated in isolated and remote areas far from the city. Moreover, there are no convenient options of public transportation and, thus, you must have a car if you want to avoid wasting hours on a bus and being

³On certain occasions, the reasons stated in the official response are just a pretext to prevent researchers from entering the prison. For example, a recent rejection received by a colleague was justified alleging the Covid-19 situation, but they were told informally that the refusal of prison managers to collaborate was the real reason why the research proposal could not be authorised. After fitting the proposal to the restrictions of the administration, it was still refused. Again, they were told informally that it was due to concerns about prison officers' unions protests. In the end, permission was granted, but the authorisation included a clause requiring a copy of the research outputs to be sent to the Prison Administration so they could examine them *before* publication.

restricted by unsuitable timetables.⁴ The situation is different regarding open prisons, which are usually located in well-connected areas on the outskirts of the city because many inmates leave daily to go to work.

In our experience, the commencement of fieldwork in prison varies greatly depending on the managing style of the prison manager. On the first day, some managers would meet with us and show interest in the goals of the project, while others would limit themselves to processing the paperwork that was needed to give us our visitors' ID. These first encounters with prison managers are also a new instance of negotiation where the spaces and times of the research project or the way in which inmates would be selected and approached are discussed.

This stage of negotiation is key for the methodological soundness of the research project, especially when it includes more than one site, as some prison managers may be more flexible than others, and even impose new conditions and restrictions to the research plan. For example, on one occasion (see Güerri, 2020), a prison manager did not allow the use of a voice recorder to interview prison officers on prison grounds—although it had been authorised by the prison administration—and it was only allowed for interviews at the external offices.

Moving around prison while conducting research is arduous due to the security measures that restrict free movement on the inside. In other contexts, it has been discussed whether researchers should or should not carry keys. On the one hand, keys are a symbol of power that places the researcher 'too close to staff' (King, 2000, p. 305, cited in Drake, 2012). On the other hand, keys allow free movement and release the researcher from staff supervision (Drake, 2012).

In our case, this was never a choice to be made. The characteristics of the Latin American prisons we visited—high levels of violence, disorganisation and large spaces—required that our safety be ensured by staff accompaniment. Whereas in Spain, most prisons have automated doors that need to be opened by the prison officer working the control cabin and, thus, having keys was never a possibility. Instead, the difference depended on whether prison managers thought we needed to be escorted around the prison or were open to us moving freely, as we explain below.

When researchers depend on prison officers to move around, entering the prison means having patience and waiting—sometimes for a long time—until someone can come to escort them. Being accompanied to the wings by prison officers brings about the opportunity to engage in fruitful, informal conversations with them, but these occasions were also used by some officers to let us know that we were not welcome or that our presence interfered with their work (for example, 'I've had to leave a colleague alone in the wing *to accompany you*').

Being allowed to move around autonomously does not mean, however, that our movements are free and unrestricted since every doorway—from the main gate to cell doors—is controlled by prison officers. This implied having to show our visitor ID and, sometimes, a letter of safe-conduct signed by the prison director every time

⁴This has been an issue reiteratively denounced by human rights associations, since prisoners' families—especially those with few socioeconomic resources—have to spend a lot of time and money in order to visit their imprisoned relatives (e.g. OSPDH, 2006).

we wanted to move from one space to another, and we were usually required to explain who we were and what we were doing in the prison. Moreover, this process of introducing and explaining ourselves had to be constantly repeated due to changing prison officer shifts.

Regardless of if we were escorted or not, once inside the wing we had relative freedom to move around the common areas at will. Thus, this difference had no substantial impact in the research process and its potential results. It needs to be noted, however, that the research experience *felt* very different indeed: not being made to wait more than strictly necessary and having autonomy was a huge contrast with the times in which we were entirely dependent on staff.

In addition to movement restrictions, time constraints were also important during our research in Spanish prisons. First, our authorisation was for a limited amount of time, and we had to hurry to get all the interviews needed. Secondly, keeping the routine and its daily procedures is as important to the maintenance of order as the control of space and, for this reason, we were only allowed inside the wings during ‘activity time’.⁵ Consequently, time limitations prevented us from observing moments such as the opening and closing of cells or mealtime and, even if we could interact freely with inmates who stayed in the wing during activity time, it complicated the task of gaining inmates’ trust progressively.

2.3 The Last Gatekeeper: Gaining the Trust of the Studied Population

Inmates generally distrust outsiders (Field et al., 2019). Moreover, the characteristics of the researcher (age, gender, race) may influence the willingness of inmates’ wanting to talk and opening to us (Beyens et al., 2015). That is why the process of gaining inmates’ trust has been described as complex, time-intensive, exhausting and dynamic (Beyens et al., 2015). For example, Drake (2012) approached inmates informally and asked if they would like to participate in a formal interview. Afterwards, she provided a document detailing the goals of the research and the consent form. Finally, the date for the interview was set and the formal conversation took place.

Our experiences are quite different to those described in the above-mentioned literature. In Spain, our time constraints made it difficult to gain inmates’ trust in a gradual manner. On the contrary, we would directly call the person and sit with them in the designated space—i.e. the dining area or an office, depending on the prison. Being called by prison officers raised suspicion on some inmates (‘why have I been called?’), so we always explained that we were academics carrying out an

⁵In Spanish prisons, there are two periods of activity time, one during the morning (between breakfast and lunch) and one during the afternoon (between the afternoon time in cell and dinner). During activity time, inmates who have programmed activities (e.g. work, rehabilitation programme, sports,...) leave to attend them, while the others stay in the common room or the yard.

independent research project and they had been randomly selected out of the complete list of inmates. Subsequently, it was made clear that their participation was completely voluntary and that their acceptance or refusal to participate would not have any consequences, either positive or negative, and, therefore, they could leave if they wanted to (only a few of them did). This was an important step as we did not want inmates to feel coerced into participating because they had been summoned by prison staff.⁶

Prisoner dynamics in El Salvador, characterised by the presence of gangs and strong power relations among prisoners, made it necessary to speak first with the inmates who had informal control of the wing (delegates of the wing and/or gang leaders).⁷ We presented the objectives and characteristics of the study to these delegates and leaders to gain their trust, emphasising that ours was an external research and that the authorities and judges would not have access to the data, that is, that the research was anonymous and confidential.⁸ After obtaining their approval, we asked the delegates/leaders to inform the rest of the inmates that we would be conducting these surveys in the following days and that we could be trusted. This served, first of all, so that the inmates would already be aware that an external survey was being conducted and so would not be caught off guard, which likely would have generated more distrust. On the other hand, it also served to ensure that the inmates already had the approval of their module delegates and/or gang leaders to participate in the study. Had we not talked to the inmate in control of the wing, it is unlikely that the prisoners would have participated in our research.

Even in the cases in which we have gained the trust of the studied population, there are certain topics that are difficult to explore. Previous research has reported prisoner reluctance to self-report in topics such as homosexual behaviour, drug use, or victimisation due to the existence of taboos or fear of reprisals (Field et al., 2019). In our research in both Spanish and Latin American prisons, we found that some of our interviewees were clearly uncomfortable responding to questions related to self-injuries and suicide attempts.

3 Employed Techniques

As mentioned above, in some contexts the use of ethnographies (and also large surveys) has predominated. In our case, the research in which we have participated has relied mainly on surveys and interviews, partly due to the limitations discussed in the previous section. For this reason, this section dedicated to the techniques

⁶Other authors have also worried about coercion risk at recruitment given the relative deprivation of inmates and the imbalance of power between prisoners and prison staff (see Abbott et al., 2018, p. 5 and 9).

⁷This information—which inmate controlled the wing—was generally provided by prison staff.

⁸It was warned, though, that if we were informed of illegal behaviour that represented a risk for the life of the inmate or of another person, we would have to share that information.

employed in prison research focuses mainly on interviews and surveys, but without underestimating the importance of observation.

A key aspect of any research design is the selection of the sample. When researching imprisoned persons, we may face a number of difficulties which are related to the characteristics of the prisons and the prison population. These difficulties will depend on the type of sample we need, especially on whether we want it to be representative or not.⁹ We discuss four of the most common difficulties below.

First, as researchers it is not always easy *to know in advance* how the prison population is distributed in the different prisons of a region, as this information is not necessarily published by the prison administrations. This is important because we may be interested in interviewing one type of population (for example, people in pre-trial detention, female prisoners or people convicted of a violent crime) rather than another, and so we need to know how to find these people. In this regard, we researchers are confronted with the consequences of the lack of transparency that characterises prisons, a widespread concern due to the effects it has mainly on incarcerated persons.¹⁰

Thus, if we cannot have this information in advance, we may need to have an initial meeting with the representatives of the prison administration in order to find out how the prison system is organised and to be able to select the prisons we want to study appropriately. Furthermore, we may also need to meet with the managers of the selected prisons in order to acquire specific information about their inmate population to determine which wings will be the focus of our investigation.

Secondly, there are difficulties in *capturing certain profiles* of the prisoner population. For example, in many countries, including people in solitary confinement in the sample can be very complicated because security controls are more restrictive (see, for example, Drake, 2012) and prison authorities may be more reluctant to allow them to be interviewed. Along the same lines, certain inmates, such as mental health patients, violent offenders and women, are normally placed only in specific prisons and it is generally necessary ‘to go and look for them’. Sometimes there are restrictions to meet with ‘vulnerable’ prisoners, which in Kauffman’s case meant no interviewing those charged with sex offences (2015, p. 57). All in all, this can make it difficult for researchers to gain access to certain people and it may cause certain groups of prisoners to be excluded or under-researched. For example, Daniels et al. (2015, cited by Abbott et al. 2018) found low reporting of data collection processes in research with violent offenders.

Thirdly, in the case we need a representative sample, another challenge is the need to have the *complete list of inmates* of each prison.¹¹ For privacy reasons, it may not be possible to have an informative list (i.e. with names and surnames)

⁹ See Abbott et al., 2018 for a scoping review of recruitment and data collection processes reported in qualitative research with prisoners.

¹⁰ See the Prison Transparency Project (Carleton University).

¹¹ In case we do not need a representative sample, there are more options that we can use directly, such as participants identifying themselves via self-response to advertisements (e.g. Bosworth et al., 2005) or using prison staff as intermediaries (see Abbott et al., 2018).

outside the prison and, therefore, carry out the selection of the sample from our computers. There are two possible solutions for this: either we ask for an anonymised list using only their prison ID number, or we ask for permission to carry out the selection on a computer in the prison itself. The first option makes it more difficult to find the people selected when we start to carry out the surveys, since we won't have their names, while the second involves asking the prison to lend us a computer and using part of the time we spend at the prison to carry out the selection in situ. Both options are useful and, in any case, depend on the prison, although in our opinion it is preferable to try to obtain the list with names because this facilitates the process of identifying the persons selected.

Moreover, we may not have the option of having the list of inmates, but the authorities may allow researchers to select the participants. In this case, one possibility to try to make our sample representative is to select in each wing, for example, one person out of five. However, sometimes it may not be possible for the researchers to make the selection at all because the prison authorities do not allow it and it is the prison authorities who choose the participants. In this case, there is no choice but to point out this difficulty in our research and to make it clear that this is a sample that is most likely not representative.

Finally, it is also common that at the time of conducting surveys in prisons, some of the people selected as part of the sample are *not available* because they have been transferred to another prison or module, are doing an activity outside the module, are on leave, have finished their sentence or are serving a temporary isolation sanction, among other reasons.¹² Furthermore, depending on the context, it is likely that some inmates refuse to be surveyed. For example, in certain prisons, such as the ones we visited in Spain, a few inmates were afraid of possible reprisals, either from the prison administration or from other prisoners, for 'talking too much'. For all these reasons, it is necessary to have a list of randomly pre-selected substitutes ready.

Additionally, we need to be careful when choosing the method for our data collection. It is usual that prison researchers use self-administered surveys to collect inmates' views. However, this approach ignores the fact that people who are *illiterate* cannot participate in self-administered surveys. For example, in Spain, 11.8% of those incarcerated are illiterate and 31.1% have not completed elementary education (Gutiérrez et al., 2010), and we found that having their perspective was especially important because almost everything that one might want to do or request in Spanish prisons requires filling out a form (Güerri & Larrauri, 2022). Thus, during our research on quality of life in Spanish prisons, we decided to implement the questionnaire as a structured interview so we would not miss this important segment of the prison population (Rodríguez et al., 2018). The implementation of this strategy was useful because, in addition to being able to get the opinions of all inmates regardless of their educational level, it enriched the responses with qualitative information that turned out highly relevant to interpret the quantitative results.

¹²For example, Kaufman (2015) explains that for every 20 people who agreed to speak with her, she only got to meet approximately four.

A further problem is how to capture those who are *not fluent* in the official language of the country where they are imprisoned. This may be solved by translating our questionnaire to different languages or including researchers who can speak the main languages spoken by the prison population in our team (e.g. Beyens & Boone, 2015; Brouwer, 2020, p. 710). However, these resources may not be available for every researcher, and it is impossible for our team to speak *every* language that may be needed. Thus, in many cases, it is likely that the language barrier cannot be overcome. This is a problem especially when it implies excluding an important part of the prison population that we are studying, as it may happen with indigenous or migrant communities. On this matter, Field et al. (2019, p. 145), regarding aboriginal people in Australian prisons, argue that '*researchers have a responsibility to familiarise themselves with the demographics of the prison population they are sampling and ensure they approach research in a manner that is culturally competent and safe for vulnerable ethnic groups*'. Along the same lines, in Spain, a considerable proportion of the prison population are foreign nationals from non-Spanish speaking countries (approx. 29.8% between 2013 and 2016),¹³ which reinforced our decision to implement our questionnaire as a structured interview (Rodríguez et al., 2018): interviewing inmates allowed us to make as many clarifications of concepts as necessary, and, in this way, we were able to interview inmates who could speak Spanish but were not completely fluent on the language.

Another issue related to language is the use of slang by the interviewees. Prison slang is usually unknown for the researcher, at least during the first visits. In our view, it is advisable to ask prisoners about the concepts we do not understand and to incorporate these words into our vocabulary. This will be useful to make sure that we understand what prisoners are telling us and demonstrate closeness to their reality.

Lastly, it is worth remembering the importance of observation. Regardless of whether we are conducting surveys or interviews, observing what each prison is like and what goes on inside gives us invaluable insights. As researchers, we are interested in seeing the dynamics between staff and prisoners as well as between prisoners themselves, and witnessing certain situations can help us understand better what prison life is like. For example, on one occasion, one of the authors was conducting research on open prisons, where prisoners are usually allowed to leave daily to work in the community. On a visit she made to an open prison in Spain, she met a prison officer who was attending a prisoner who had left the hospital with an intravenous line (IV) still in his arm for fear of not arriving back to the prison on time. According to the literature (Martí, 2018; Shammas, 2014), prisoners in open prisons often experience stress and anxiety because of the challenge of reconciling prison and work schedules. This scene illustrated this pain of semi-liberty very well and demonstrates how observation can complement techniques such as surveys and interviews.

¹³ More specifically, 56.2% of the prison population were born in Spain, 17.9% in Africa, 14% in Latin American countries, 6% in Western Europe and 5.9% in other regions of the world (Güerri & Alarcón, 2021).

For the purpose of analysing data, it is often useful for researchers to make a schematic map of the different areas of the prison and what each module is used for, since this information is not usually public. Since we will not always have the option of returning, it is especially advisable to note down as much information as possible on the visits we make. In addition, it is useful to keep a fieldwork diary, which can also be enriched by the experience of all the researchers in the case of a team. For example, in some of our investigations, we would meet after each day to exchange impressions on the interviews we had conducted and to share our reflections.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

Throughout our prison research, a number of emotional and ethical dilemmas frequently arise that must be addressed. As Field et al. (2019, p. 139) state, the correctional environment represents an ‘ethical minefield’ for researchers. These challenges may appear at different points in the research, from the design of the project, during implementation, or in the data analysis phase.

Thus, when we design the research, one of the first ethical questions that emerges is whether we should compensate participants financially for the time dedicated to the study. This is an extensive debate in the social sciences (e.g. Field et al., 2019) and depending on the discipline and geographic context, there are often different positions in this regard. In the review carried out by Abbott et al. (2018), they found a minority of studies that reported monetary or other participant incentives and a comparable number of studies stating they were not given, while most studies did not mention this question at all.

On one hand, there is concern about how offering a monetary incentive can influence inmates’ consent, as those in need of money may participate even if they originally felt disinclined to. This creates a twofold ethical problem. Regarding our research results, it is considered that remunerating participation can have a selection effect (more participation of those with lower resources) and provide worse answers (since participants do not have an intrinsic motivation to collaborate, they may not answer the survey carefully). More importantly, in the specific case of prisons, remuneration has also been questioned due to its potential coercive influence on inmates given the importance of money inside prisons. Not having money in prison may imply asking for favours—that have to be returned. Thus, offering an economic incentive may have a coercive effect on the most vulnerable prisoners (Grant & Sugarman, 2004).

On the other hand, it has been argued that the fact that there is an economic motivation does not necessarily mean that there is no intrinsic motivation or that inmates feel coerced to collaborate with the study. Furthermore, if we don’t reward participation, it may seem that we are taking advantage of them. However, monetary rewards are not the only option. In this sense, some feminist researchers have emphasised ‘the importance of reciprocity, egalitarianism and sharing in research’,

although it is not always clear how to put such ideals into practice (Bosworth et al., 2005, p. 255).

In sum, it is always important for researchers to consider the implications of each option and assess the circumstances, since other factors, such as budget, may interfere apart from ethical issues. In our case, we have usually tried to remunerate inmates for their participation because we believe in the importance of appreciating the time they devote to us. However, providing this remuneration has not always been possible due to the lack of budget or to bureaucratic hurdles. It is important to note that, in these occasions, we have not experienced the lack of remuneration as a problem for the research. Moreover, regardless of whether they are financially rewarded or not, it is important to make it clear to prisoners that their choice regarding participation will not benefit (or worsen) their current situation.

Other ethical and emotional conundrums arise during implementation due to the imbalances of power that characterise prison life. As we have already mentioned, research in prisons is strongly conditioned by the issue of security and by the power relations that exist, both among prisoners themselves and between inmates and the prison authorities. In this context, it is important that we conduct our research in a way that protects the privacy and integrity of the participants and creates a suitable environment for the interviews or surveys.

For example, we have already mentioned the need to speak with the inmates who controlled the wings in a prison of Latin America in order to be able to conduct our research: without such ‘permission’, prisoners who spoke with us could have been endangered. However, such threats also came from prison staff themselves. In the course of the mentioned research, our team learned that the inmates had been threatened by the prison management: they were not allowed to refuse to participate in the surveys but they were also forbidden to speak negatively of the staff or the prison. We had formed a team of about ten interviewers and spread out in a large room, each of us sitting on one side of a table, with the interviewee sitting on the opposite side. At first, we gave no indication as to which side the interviewer and the interviewee should sit on, but one day, we realised that there were several custodians standing at the back of the room. They were standing at a distance (as we had asked them to do so that they could not overhear conversations) but they were looking at us in a way that we found threatening, creating an atmosphere that was not appropriate for an interview. Knowing about the threats, we decided that the interviewers would sit facing the guards, so that the prisoners would not have to see them while being interviewed. In this way, we tried to ensure that this situation affected the people being interviewed as little as possible.¹⁴

The above example illustrates one of the ways in which prison staff can interfere with fieldwork and affect data collection process, privacy and confidentiality (see other examples in Abbott et al., 2018, p. 5). At the same time, this anecdote demonstrates that there are some measures that we can take in this type of situation within

¹⁴In addition, the organisation that had hired us to conduct the research took other measures to try to protect the survey participants.

the limited manoeuvrability that researchers have in prisons: being careful with our notes, asking another person to move away from the table if we suspect that they are eavesdropping, or modifying the layout of the space, among others.

Another ethical dilemma that frequently arises has to do with the life stories and conditions in which many prisoners live. It is not uncommon for some prisoners to explain extremely difficult situations to us, and even ask for our help. For example, one of the authors was told by a foreign prisoner that he had hepatitis (which was also evident in the state of his eyes) and begged her to help him saying that he was going to be deported and that in his country of origin he would not be able to afford his medication and would die. On another occasion, after asking a prisoner if he had ever engaged in self-injury, he showed us his arm, which was full of scars caused by self-inflicted cuts. The prisoner told us that, during a previous sentence, he had received news that almost his whole family had been killed during a bombing in Syria. Additionally, in some countries the conditions are unquestionably appalling, and we have interviewed people with serious health problems because they have been locked up for years without being able to move or even see the sun. What do we as researchers do in such situations? What should we do? What can we do?

Our position is that when we do research we should stick to our role as researchers. We cannot and should not provide individual assistance, which we make clear before conducting the interviews, and reiterate if necessary during them. However, this does not mean that we cannot listen and show empathy, or refer them to the people who could help them (for example, in Spain there are several associations committed to assisting inmates). We can also become involved as academics by making an effort to ensure that our research has a positive impact on the conditions of prisoners and the functioning of the prison. As Beyens states, ‘being a critical criminologist goes beyond writing academic articles or reports (...) Rather, there is the constant endeavour of writing opinion pieces in newspapers, debating with politicians and prison administrators in the media and at conferences, and of participating in discussion about radical alternative projects by and with practitioners’ (2015, p. 74, based on Claus et al., 2013). In other words, those who wish to participate beyond strictly academic activities have several means to do so.

We also need to consider the emotional impact that testimonies such as the ones described above may have on the researcher. Witnessing the suffering of those incarcerated or feeling that we are in a dangerous environment can affect our judgement when conducting fieldwork and analysing the data and, therefore, reflexivity is needed. There are, indeed, some interesting essays on the emotional impact that such situations may have on researchers, not only negatively but also in a positive way (see, for example, Jewkes, 2012). In this sense, we find that acknowledging the relevance of emotions in prison research is of utter importance.

Similarly, our position of privilege as researchers and the characteristics that make up our identity—i.e. gender, race, nationality, age, class...—also should be taken into account while conducting fieldwork and trying to understand our data. For example, our first experience conducting fieldwork was soon after graduation. Being young women, prison staff often showed patronising behaviour. However, we were able to take advantage of the situation and get answers to many questions since

we were not perceived as a threat and many prison officers were happy to ‘lecture’ us on how prisons *really* work. In addition, we believe that doing research in Latin American prisons while being European—which is evident due to our Spaniard accent—has made the people we interviewed trust us more quickly. Probably this is because being clearly foreign researchers (and also European foreigners, who are in a more privileged position), it is more plausible that the study is independent and not some kind of deception on the part of the Administration.

In sum, reflexivity is essential in prison research. However, we believe that we have to be wary that the acknowledgement of our emotions and positionality does not become the centre of the debate, since this would displace the focus from what really matters—prison staff and, especially, prisoners, that is, those who can really be affected by the research (aggressions, reprisals, threats...). In other words, putting the researcher at the centre of the debate when we talk about emotional impact in the context of prisons seems inappropriate to us because it disregards our position of privilege. This does not mean that we deny that this type of research can have an emotional impact on researchers. This impact is real, and moreover, it can vary among researchers whose positions of privilege may also differ according to personal experiences or socio-economic background. What we argue is that *academically* it should not be the main point, unless it is to reflect about how this impact may affect our objectivity when conducting fieldwork and analysing data.

5 Research in Prison and Research with Prisoners: Lessons Learned Through Challenging Interactions Within a Challenging Context

As this book attests, empirical research in criminology poses many challenges. Notwithstanding, besides the usual hurdles of criminological research, carrying out studies with imprisoned persons has its own set of difficulties due to the context in which research is developed—the prison—and the vulnerabilities of the studied population—the prisoners.

In the first place, studying the realities of imprisoned persons requires, on most occasions,¹⁵ carrying out research inside prisons, that is, inside institutions which are heavily bureaucratised, highly securitised, rigidly routinised and, generally, lacking in transparency. The implications of these prison characteristics on imprisoned people have been widely studied but, as we have shown in this article, they also condition researchers.

For example, due to *bureaucratisation*, we need to follow long, intricate and tiresome administrative procedures to get permission for our fieldwork. But the

¹⁵The exception would be those cases in which we are researching persons in open prisons (e.g. Martí, 2019) or that have just been released (e.g. Maruna, 2001), where we can interview these persons on the outside.

inflexibility of bureaucratic regulations can have other negative consequences, such as making it almost impossible to give financial retribution to inmates who had helped us with our research.¹⁶ Granting *security* is a constant concern of prison administrators and, thus, it will determine what we are allowed to do (e.g. to record interviews), or which areas of prison we are authorised to access (e.g. high-security wings). In this sense, a structured *routine* is essential to order, but researchers may disturb this routine or occupy human resources that are needed to implement it. Thus, our presence may be limited to certain periods in which the disturbance we cause will be minimal, limiting our chances of non-participant observation. Finally, the *lack of transparency* that characterises many prison systems hinders sample selection and makes it difficult to know how prisons work, which is especially troublesome if it is our first time doing fieldwork inside prisons.

The second source of difficulties related to researching imprisoned persons are the characteristics of the prisoners themselves, who usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds and, once in prison, are subjected to the power of prison authorities.

As we have explained, *illiterate persons* cannot fill self-administered surveys and there are *language barriers* due to the high proportion of aboriginal persons or foreign nationals in certain countries. Thus, researchers need to adapt their research techniques and strategies or, otherwise, some imprisoned persons will remain invisible. A more general question related to language issues is that researchers may also find that they need to learn prison jargon in order to communicate better with prisoners. Another sensitive aspect is that some *vulnerable prisoners* share life histories with a high emotional component. These situations raise ethical questions about how researchers should react and need to be acknowledged and reflected on since they may jeopardise the objectivity of the researcher when analysing the collected data. Finally, the *imbalance of power* between inmates and researchers and, most notably, between the prison administration and inmates, also raises ethical questions about the validity of the consent granted by inmates and the possible repercussions their participation may have for them.

Some of these problems and dilemmas have been widely discussed in previous literature. Notwithstanding, we would like to highlight that, in our view, essays reflecting on the challenges of prison research have not addressed certain methodological limitations that researching inside prisons entail. For example, in Spain, selecting a purely random and representative sample seems virtually impossible due to the difficulty of accessing the lists of inmates, the limited availability of those persons who are engaged in more activities, or the high mobility between modules and prisons. We were also surprised by the fact that self-administered surveys are widely used but the issue of illiterate inmates is never discussed. Similarly, only

¹⁶On one occasion, we wanted to reward inmates' participation with 5 euros, but the only way to do so was by depositing the money in their prison account, one by one. This procedure would also consume many resources from the prison administration, and thus, it was suggested that we donate goods (e.g. books, footballs) to the wing instead.

those investigations focused specifically on aboriginal or foreign national populations seem to acknowledge the problem presented by language barriers.

In this sense, we coincide with the concerns voiced by Abbott et al. (2018) about many prison studies not offering all the details about their methodology and the troubles they had to face. Entering the prison and conducting research with imprisoned persons is a challenging task regardless of the country in which the researcher is based. Thus, we believe that being open and honest about the difficulties we encountered, and sharing the lessons we learned, is indispensable to fully understand not only the endeavour that prison research entails but prison life itself.

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Chapter 17

Language, Emotions, and Access to Refugee Women: Ingredients for Reflexivity



Gabriela Mesquita Borges and Rita Faria

1 Introduction

This chapter is drawn from a study conducted within the scope of the doctoral project carried out by the first author and supervised by the second author. This study had the main goal of understanding the process of becoming a refugee woman from a criminological and gender perspective. Particularly, the purpose was to access refugee women's narratives to validate their experiences of violence and agency as a direct source of knowledge in three stages, as well as in geographical and symbolic places: in their country of origin, during the displacement journey; and in their country of asylum.

The refugee women were recruited from Portugal, the country where they applied for international protection. Instead of looking for refugee women in the community, by placing an advertisement in local newspapers or through online advertisements for research subjects, the participants were sought out with the help of professionals from different institutions and other national entities involved in the Portuguese asylum system. The sample selection followed four criteria, namely, the women were 18 years of age or older; they had received the Portuguese asylum system protection, either as asylum seekers or as refugees; they arrived in Portugal during the last European crisis of refugees; and they understood and spoke Portuguese or English, or, if not, agreed to the presence of a translator during the interviews.

From the 24 women recruited, 14 women were from the Middle East, 11 from Syria and three women from Iraq. The other ten women were from Africa, namely,

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three from Angola, two from Congo, one from Togo, one from Sudan, one from Somalia, one from Gambia, and one from Morocco. The ages of the women interviewed ranged from a minimum of 21 years old to a maximum of 48 years old. Regarding their arrival, the average number of years that these women have been living in Portugal varied from 6 months to 2 years.

The study was conducted through the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The COVID-19 pandemics had a significant impact on this study because it overlapped with the data collection phase. For that reason, only five interviews were conducted face-to-face in the programmed schedule, in February of 2020. The remaining 19 were only possible to be rescheduled for the beginning of 2021, and were conducted online using the *Zoom* platform, due to the COVID-19 contention measures, such as social distance, lockdown, and curfews.

According to Probst (2015, pp. 39) “*criteria for qualitative rigor tend to emphasize the relational aspects of knowledge construction, including transparency, reciprocity, and critical self-reflection.*” Nonetheless, Gringeri et al. (2013) pointed to a surprising absence of reflexive practice and reflexive accounts in the published investigations of most of the researchers. With this in mind, the current chapter will stress the importance of being self-aware and reflexive about the researcher’s own role in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

Following a constructivist approach, in the next sections, the authors will showcase how trustworthiness is possible to achieve through the right balance of reflexivity and subjectivity that allows the researcher to consider the data collected and the reflections that such data were subjected to; the negotiations between the various subjects involved in the investigation process; and the performance of the researcher and its relationship with the participants.

2 The Importance of Reflexivity in Creating Scientific Knowledge

While designing and conducting the abovementioned study, the authors of this chapter were confronted with questioning some aspects of epistemology, that is, the status and characteristics of scientific knowledge. These questions correspond, first and foremost, to those involved in any research using qualitative methodologies, but also, in particular, to those resulting from the application of data collection techniques that require a more intimate relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Overall, validity, reliability, and objectivity are well-accepted criteria in the positivistic epistemological approach to most of quantitative empirical research and are considered to be achieved through the suppression of any subjective interpretations and arguments in the production of knowledge (Imai, 2017). However, if the researcher develops qualitative research based on a constructivist approach, validity, reliability, and objectivity are considered not to be satisfactory for establishing

trustworthiness (Chandra & Shag, 2017). The core of trustworthiness can be described as the means by which qualitative researchers ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are evident in research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). According to Williams and Morrow (2009, pp. 577), there are three main categories of trustworthiness that qualitative researchers should strive to obtain: integrity of data, balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, and clear communication of findings.

Focusing on the authors' second category, "*balance between reflexivity and subjectivity*" (2009, pp. 577), the criticisms directed at the problem of subjectivity in qualitative investigations are not limited to the type of data used and the results obtained but extended to the ways in which "objective" knowledge is conceived (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In general terms, for most positivistic approaches, objectivity refers to the neutrality of knowledge, to knowledge free of any subjective interference. Accordingly, neutral knowledge depends fundamentally on the way knowledge about reality takes place, thus concluding that without this neutrality there is no objectivity and, therefore, knowledge produced in these conditions lacks scientific validity (Imai, 2017).

On the other hand, the constructivist assumption is that knowledge is socially constructed—a product of subjectivity—generated from the relationship between the subject that knows and the corresponding object that is known—a relationship that is historically, socially, and subjectively situated (Chafetz, 2006). Mann (2016, pp.28) describes reflexivity as being created precisely in this intersection because reflexivity is "(...) *focused on the self and ongoing intersubjectivities. It recognizes mutual shaping, reciprocity, and bi-directionality, and that interaction is context-dependent and context renewing.*" Likewise, for Attia and Edge (2017, pp. 33), reflexivity "(...) *involves a process of ongoing mutual shaping between researcher and research.*" Edge (2011) further characterized reflexivity as encompassing two interacting elements: prospective reflexivity, regarding the effect of the whole-person-researcher on the research, and retrospective reflexivity, related to the impact of the research on the researcher.

Reflexivity also plays an important role regarding research's ethical issues.

The study presented here gained the approval of a research ethics committee from the Faculty of law and criminology of the University of Porto. This was a fundamental step to take before the data collection. Still, ethical research is much more than research that has gained a research ethics committee approval. Reflexivity is closely linked to the ethical practice of research and can be particularly useful in the work field where research ethics committees are not available (Attia & Edger, 2017). According to McGraw et al. (2000, pp. 68), reflexivity is "(...) *a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge.*" Consequently, in conducting qualitative research, a researcher that is reflexive will be in a better condition to be aware of the ethically significant moments as they arise and will have a foundation for answering in a way

that is likely to be ethically appropriate even in unexpected circumstances (Cowburn, et al., 2017; Berger, 2016).

In conclusion, reflexivity should be considered and promulgated as a way of ensuring not only rigorous research practices but also ethical research practices. Following the constructivist approach that considers knowledge as nonneutral, believing that trustworthiness is possible to achieve in qualitative research through the right balance of reflexivity and subjectivity, as stressed by Williams and Morrow (2009), the next section will demonstrate how the authors of this chapter actively pursued such balance throughout the study on the process of becoming a refugee woman.

3 Methodological Challenges: Evaluating Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

The present research adopts the perspective advanced by Harding (2015) to maximize the objectivity of a knowledge that is assumed to be partial and situated, and which is based on strong reflexivity (Berger, 2015). For Harding (2015), no knowledge is built without containing the marks that reveal its production process, that is, the researcher's personal, social, and political interests and position. And the circumstances conditioning knowledge can also condition researchers and projects. According to feminist standpoint theorists, knowledge is a product of the time and place from which it is produced, which has several implications as to the way knowledge is conceived in general, and to the problem of its objectivity. The product of knowledge is, therefore, collective, generated by the diverse experiences involved in this epistemological relationship (Attia & Edge, 2017).

The study presented in this chapter is more in alignment with feminist perspectives according to which knowledge is situated and partial. To criticize knowledge, as well as the subject that produces it, strong reflexivity that goes through the whole design of the research is needed: from the selection of the problem, through all phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Although this program of reflexivity is an exercise in maximizing objectivity, Berger (2015) concludes that there is no single way of conceptualizing it. Therefore, even if the researcher tries to minimize the impact of the researcher/researched relationship on the data collection process, this impact will still exist, and the data are therefore always an interaction product. With that in mind, feminist perspectives encourage the focus on the social positioning of participants as a way to maximize the objectivity of the research.

Considering the lessons learned in the course of the study presented in this chapter, the next four subsections will provide examples of how to become a reflexive researcher by exploring the methodological challenges faced by the first author during the fieldwork, namely, the use of translators during the conduction of interviews; the emotional impact of the research on the researcher; the relationship

between the researcher and the research; and the ordeals of collecting data during lockdowns/a global pandemic.

3.1 The Use of Translators During the Conduction of Interviews

In the study conducted, there was a wide variety of nationalities of participants and some of them were unable to communicate either in Portuguese or English. To overcome that limitation, two translators were used in the conduction of 13 interviews: one French translator for three interviews, and one Arabic translator for ten interviews. Language barriers were preconsidered when designing the study and have been presented in methods' literature. Still, some initial concerns existed both regarding a translator bias, as well as the regional and cultural diversity of the refugee women interviewed. There was, thus, a risk of jeopardizing accuracy and meaningfulness of the data reported. In fact, the existing body of literature has identified that translators in qualitative research play a decisive part in terms of maintaining the integrity of meanings being conveyed in original data (Ho et al., 2019).

Because interpretation and meaning are core to qualitative research, it is natural for concerns about translation to emerge, namely the fact that translation is also an interpretative act, and therefore, original meanings may get lost in the process mediated by translators. It is, thus, crucial to foresee and prevent any additional challenges created by differences in language that could hinder the transfer of meaning from participant to research, or that could cause the loss of the meanings and compromise the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. In this regard, Squires (2009) synthesizes methodological recommendations into a list of criteria used to evaluate how researchers deal with translators and interpreters in their qualitative studies. Such criteria were, then, carefully tested and used during the research process to evaluate the impact of translators on data collection and analysis. This improved the reflexivity process and allowed the authors to fulfill the aim of being reflexive researchers, as showcased next.

According to Squires (2009, p. 279), to accomplish conceptual equivalence, a researcher must have "*provided a rationale for why the analysis occurred in the chosen language, especially if it was not the same language as the participants.*" In that matter, the objectives of the study justify the need for the use of translators, because, while designing the mentioned study and looking at the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees worldwide, it was noticeable that most people come from Africa and the Middle Eastern regions. If the sample had been limited to speakers of the Portuguese language, the data collection would have lost its richness and variety.

Likewise, the researcher must have "*developed a translation lexicon for multi-language studies to ensure conceptual equivalence*" (Squires, 2009). In the study, terms such as "rape," "sexual assault," "forced marriage," "abuse," and such, were

translated into Portuguese, French, and Arabic using words in those languages that had the same meaning, to establish a lexicon suitable for the current research.

Lastly, the research should have *“had the translation validated by a qualified bilingual individual not directly involved with data collection or the initial translation”* (Squires, 2009). The interview script was first written in Portuguese and then translated to English, French, and Arabic, and all of the translations were verified, in terms of sentence formulation and the concepts used, by natural speakers of those same languages who were not directly involved in the research project.

In relation to the translator credentials, Squires (2009, p. 280) suggests that the researcher must have *“briefly described the translator’s qualifications or previous experience with translation.”* Both translators who participated in the study had previously work on scientific research that involved similarly vulnerable participants and therefore were considered well prepared. Nonetheless, prior to their participation in the interviews, a meeting was held between the researcher and the two translators separately, to explain the intended meaning and its context in the source language used in the interview guide. This was done in a side-by-side procedure, in which the researcher and the translator discussed possible wordings. Furthermore, the researcher needs to have *“described the researcher’s level of language competence”* (Ibidem). The translator of the Arabic language was a natural speaker of the language since she was born in Palestine. The translator of the French language was born in France and completed primary school in that country, before moving to Portugal. She also had French classes at the faculty and spoke French fluently.

Finally, the researcher must *“describe the researchers or translators’ identity in contrast to that of the participants”* (Ibidem). Both translators were female, which was one of the criteria for their selection because the sample of refugees were all females and, due to the sensitivity and vulnerability related to their status of refugees, it was considered more appropriate to have only women participating in the conduction of the interviews.

On the translator’s role, Squires (2009, p. 280) emphasized the researchers’ duty to *“describe the translator’s role in the study.”* In the study, both translators participated as intermediates of the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee: they translated the question in the language of the interviewee and then translated the answer into Portuguese, in the case of French translator; and into English, in the case of the Arabic translator.

The researcher should also have *“described at what point(s) during the research process they used translation services”* (Squires, 2009). The translation services were used prior to the conduction of the interviews, to check if the interview script was properly translated; during the interviews, the translators asked the questions and to report the answers; and in the transcription phase of the interviews and in the validation of the transcriptions’ content. The validation of the interviewer’s content was used in relation to the conducted in Arabic. This happened because the answers of the interviewees were translated into English first, which is neither the natural language of the translator nor the researcher. Therefore, after the transcription of the interviews, the researcher sent those transcriptions to the translator, who listened to

the interviews and double-checks the information translated to see if it matched with what was said by the interviewees during the conduction of the interviews.

Equally, the researcher must have “*identified who conducted the analysis and in what language it took place*” (Squires, 2009). The analysis of the data collected was conducted by the researchers, and that analysis was made both in Portuguese, for the cases of the interviews transcribed in Portuguese, and in English, for the interviews that were translated into English.

Regarding considerations for different qualitative approaches to avoid translation disruptions of the fluid research process, Squires (2009, p. 281) highlighted that the researcher must have “*selected the appropriate research method for the cross-language qualitative study.*” Due to the fact that the study in question required the participation of two translators, and given the vulnerability of the participants, the in-depth semi-structured interview was considered to be the most appropriate method to conduct the investigation.

Still, the research should have “*pilot tested the translated interview guide prior to conducting the study*” (Squires, 2009). The interview scripts in French and in Arabic were tested with two native speakers of the French and Arabic languages, to see if the questions were properly translated and were understandable, clear, and logical.

Additionally, the researcher must have “*stated in the limitations section, or another appropriate location, that translation or use of translators may have affected the results*” (Ibidem). In the field, language barriers were quite difficult to digest, and it became frustrating for the first author (being the interviewer) to not be able to ask questions or understand the answers given by the subjects. Thus, the first author felt unable to fully control the interviews and had to learn how to delegate and share the conduction of the interviews with someone else—which was somehow hard to accept. Simultaneously, she felt that, while she completely trusted the translators chosen, she could never be totally reassured that questions and answers were being translated exactly as they were presented.

Nonetheless, as the interviews were carried out, it became evident the fundamental role of the translators in establishing a trusting relationship between the first author and the participants since the translators left the women comfortable and willing to share their stories. Although the interviews conducted without the presence of translators lasted longer, this did not compromise the amount of data collected, as it was possible to ask, more or less, the same questions. Nonetheless, that is a possibility that must be recognized and planned for, when conducting qualitative research though the use of translators.

As a practical challenge, it can be shared that the first author’s ability to concentrate during the interviews was greatly diminished because there were many “still” moments of listening to the conversation between translator and interviewee, where she was not able to understand what was being said. In order to overcome this, she started to record in a notebook the behavior manners of the interviews, their tones of voices, body postures, and such, which allowed her to stay “present” and to gather secondary information that was very useful for data analysis. In fact, comparing the collection of this type of intel in the interviews with the presence of

translators and with the ones conducted only by the first author, it is possible to conclude that, in the former, this type of intel was richer than in the latter.

Furthermore, the mediation via the translators made it more difficult to establish empathy and rapport with participants than in the interviews conducted only by the first author, due to the time gap between the subjects' responses and the translation that followed. It becomes very hard to convey understanding, active listening or compassion with the interviewees' narratives when one does not fully understand what is being said, especially considering the participants were retelling victimization episodes and potentially traumatic experiences.

The first author was able to establish empathy and rapport with the refugee women by returning to the more sensitive subjects conveyed to her by the translators and by making some comforting comments to the participants, not only using words, but also with gestures, that showcase her solidarity and admiration for the heartbreaking experiences faced by the women interviewed. In this way, the first author hoped to show she was not there only to capture information but also to establish a trusting, sympathetic, understanding relationship with the participants. However, this last aspect should be considered as a warning to fellow researchers who find themselves in the same situation, and further studies are needed that explore and evaluate how the data collection and data analysis can be impacted upon by the ways in which the researchers address the challenges of cross-language qualitative research.

Additionally, debating the first author's own frustrations and insecurities with the second author of this chapter improved her critical thinking and self-awareness regarding her own posture and oral communication skills. Besides, reaching out to other fellow researchers who had already performed interviews with translators or had assumed the position of translators themselves, gave the first author a greater insight into others' perceptions of translators, which increased her research experience, information processing, as well as her positive attitudes in relation to the conduction of the interviews.

3.2 The Emotional Impact of Research on the Researcher

Qualitative research often involves a consideration of the impact of the feelings, views, attitudes, and values that the participants hold to have on the data collection and the data analysis. Such consideration has traditionally been developed from a methodological perspective on a more pragmatic level, that is, how they affect the researcher studying sensitive and emotional topics such as victims of crime, marginalized groups, and criminals (Pio & Singh, 2016). While reflecting on the impact of conducting this study, two main aspects were identified: the emotional impact created by the sensitive topics being explored, and the challenges faced when trying to respect and honor the marginalized and often silenced refugee women. All this, while simultaneously trying to balance the power disparities that usually exist between the researcher and the participants, as was the case for this study, since the

researchers were in a privileged position regarding the participants: both of the authors were Portuguese citizens with no similar personal experiences to the women being interviewed, who were in a very fragile situation, under the protection of the Portuguese State, as refugees, having escaped their home countries, having experienced several encounters of violence on the basis of race, class, and gender, and hoping on becoming Portuguese citizens one day.

Regarding emotional impact, the stories that the participants shared were often catastrophic and heartbreaking, with life paths scarred by episodes of relentless abandonment, repeated violence, and constant violation of their human rights, provoking emotions that strongly affected the first author, both during and after the interviews. Feelings of sadness upon the interviewees' narratives of violence were frequent, and sometimes let the first author to hold back from crying during the interviews. Indeed, listening to the stories of the refugee women led to the development of feelings of sorrow and distress for their personal experiences, which created a sense of discomfort and nausea that stayed with the first author, even after the interviews were finished.

The first author often resorted to the second author's and colleagues' support, as well as to her closest friends, who were key players in helping her digest and overcome feelings of powerlessness that she felt in relation to her incapability to help the interviewees in a more practical way. Indeed, they reassured her that, although she could not assist the refugee women interviewed in housing, health, and school matters, the study that she was developing would provide a significant contribution to the scientific knowledge in the field of criminological, gender, and migration studies on refugee women.

Simultaneously, the participants' narratives of agency, a concept that has been used in reference to their decision-making and action-taking in their cultural contexts (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021), their strength, determination, capacity to overcome hardships, created in the first author strong motivation and willingness to continue on the scientific journey. Indeed, she hoped to demonstrate the potential contributions of refugee women to the societies that welcome them, and more broadly, to the so often lost notions of humanity, human rights, kindness, and equality.

The first author's feelings of empathy demanded a constant process of refocusing because she wanted to prevent her emotional closeness with the participants from having an impact on her right, as a researcher, to interpret and represent data (Ashby, 2011). It was understood that a safe emotional distance from the experiences of the participants was necessary to maintain an objective glance about the research itself, keeping in mind the ethical dilemmas of power and ownership. Doing otherwise would fail in representing the real voices of participants in interviews and would potentially "*reinforce the very systems of oppression it seeks to address.*" (Ashby, 2011, p. 11). But an emotional connection with the participants was also crucial to let them feel comfortable and willing to share their personal stories. This meant allowing for subjectivity bonding to be built between the first author and the interviewees conveyed through smiles, light touch in their hands, complements to their

appearance, and the use of sentences such as “I see,” “I understand it,” “yes,” and “I can only imagine what you went through.”

In the online interviews, the refugee women were at their homes, which were provided to them by the Portuguese state. In those cases, the first author also gave compliments on their houses, and acknowledged when the women presented complaints regarding their accommodations. Likewise, she was also receptive when the women introduced her to their kids. Indeed, the more relaxed moments where the participants showed their homes and their children were very important in establishing a trustworthy relationship between them and the first author, which favored the process of collecting data. For the record, the kids were not present during the conduction of the interviews, because they were either there at the beginning of the interview and then left, or they arrived at the end.

Another very important element for the mental well-being of the first author was the use of a journal. To actively develop the process of reflexivity, it is necessary to adopt methods for attaining a reflexive stance such as “*keeping reflexive diaries, writing ourselves into field notes, recording analytic and methodological decisions in memos, and being reflexive about every decision we make*” (Barry et al., 1990, p.31). Reflexive notes regarding every single interview were recorded, describing all sorts of things, from the setting to other aspects that were noted both during the interview but also during the transcription and analysis.

It must also be stressed that the first author actually identified with the refugee women, not only due to also being a woman herself and being closer in age with almost every woman interviewed but as well because of the empathy and rapport that she established with them. The authors also acknowledge that the participants’ narratives would have lost their meaning and interpretability without the emotional responses that were present both in the interviewees and in the first author. The first author was quite conscious of her privileged position as a European, white, well-educated middle-class woman. Curiously, this led her to feel less, than more powerful, toward the participants. In fact, the notions of power and privilege can emerge linked to the social injustice and inequality quite often felt by the researcher when researching minority groups (Milner, 2007).

Critically reflecting upon their roles as a researcher in relation to the refugee women, the authors adopted a reflexive posture toward their own potential power to bring self-awareness about their positionality in relation to these women. By constantly reminding themselves of their own identity and role in the research project, they were also able to develop feelings of admiration, respect, and gratitude toward the women interviewed.

As a final note, the authors would also like to highlight the lack of a protocol provided by the ethics committee on how to manage the emotional impact generated by the research on Ph.D. students. Being so “green” to scientific research, the authors felt that it would be crucial for Ph.D. students that the ethics committee’s role extended from approving Ph.D. projects to a more supportive, collaborative, and helpful role, by providing advice and guidelines to students, and even if needed, psychological assistance.

3.3 *The Relationship Between Researcher and the Refugee Women Interviewed*

This study followed Attia and Edges' criteria of the interconnection of three elements—trust, collaboration, and corroboration—to reflect on the impact of the relationship between the researcher and the participants in “*establishing measures of trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry*” (Attia & Edges, 2017, p. 38).

Creating trust between the researcher and the participants is essential to establish reliability for qualitative research with participants. Without it, data collection can become very difficult or even empty of relevant content. In other words, a solid base of reliance between the researcher and the participants is more likely to generate accurate and trustworthy data (Maxwell, 2013). Through a careful reflection of the interactive and dynamic relationship between researcher and participant, including particular interests, perspectives, and surroundings, it is possible to recognize and work on the subjectivity involved in conducting qualitative research. In research, trust is constructed and endured through various forms, such as developing relationships and sharing a track record that demonstrates liability, common interests, and consideration for the best interests of others (Austin & Sutton, 2014).

In the mentioned study, informant consent agreements were translated into English, Arabic, and French, that is, into the languages known by the participants. The refugee women were asked if the documents were written properly before they signed them, with no major errors being reported. The agreement also contained a Portuguese version with the same information content for the ethics committee to be able to validate them. Verbal consent during the interviews was also asked for so it could be kept on record. Participants' privacy and anonymity, as well as confidentiality, were meticulously explained and guaranteed through encrypting computer-based files, storing documents (signed consent forms) in a locked file cabinet, and removing personal identifiers (such as their names) from study documents as soon as possible.

However, according to Anderson and Edwards (2010), this whole process is perhaps unsatisfactory for constructing trust and should be considered a small effort toward that objective. Therefore, the first author tried to achieve the participants' trust, at the time of presenting the research to the refugee women, by not only explaining the topic and objectives to them but also by explaining her personal motives for engaging in the research. Indeed, she told the refugee women, briefly, about her academic background in criminology and in violence against women and children, as well as her personal conviction that refugee women's accounts regarding their own experiences of violence, marginalization, and segregation, are a powerful tool to achieve the proper knowledge on that matter and to make a contribution to change.

The term collaboration in academic research is usually thought to mean an equal partnership between the researcher and the participants, which implicates the creation of real communication and partnerships, which are pursuing mutually interesting and beneficial research (Bansal et al., 2019). Collaboration places the researcher

and the participants in the same category of respect and implies ethical conduct that preserves honesty, integrity, justice, transparency, and confidentiality (Korstjens, & Moser, 2018).

From the first contact with the participants, at the recruitment stage, until the actual moment of the interviews, the first author constantly reaffirmed the importance of this research and the impact that it could potentially have not only on the interviewees but also on others who may have experienced similar experiences, as well as the scientific and academic benefits of creating more knowledge about the process of becoming a refugee woman. The participants' understanding of the importance of the research is fundamental for promoting their willingness to participate in the research and to share deeply personal details that can be crucial to the posterior data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). And most of the women interviewed showcased their willingness to contribute, with their personal experiences, to the creation of best practices of reception and integration, not only for themselves but also for future refugee women. Some of them also reported that they would like to have a more active role in helping others, such as performing jobs at ONGs for refugees and such.

Additionally, the first author frequently applied the rules of thumb of interviews such as active listening, nodding and respecting silences, repeating sections of the narrative of participants, asking prompt and feedback questions, techniques usually adequate to deepen trust, empathy, and rapport, and to promote spontaneity and richer accounts from the interviewees. Furthermore, the first author also used some nontraditional ways to bond with the interviewees, such as sharing personal details of her life, her knowledge regarding trivial information regarding participants' home country, and even using humor to positively engage in the criticisms made by them to the Portuguese asylum system.

Regarding corroboration, the first author tried to corroborate the interpretations and meanings that she was attributing to the participants' discourses during the interviews, by frequently repeating the answers given by the participants, and by transparently sharing her understanding of those answers. Moreover, she always did her best to transmit a posture of naturalness, friendliness, and trust. Indeed, participants are more predisposed to share personal experiences and reply spontaneously to the questions being asked when they perceive the interviewer to be compassionate and engaged with their situation (Marks et al., 2018; Pfaff, & Markak, 2017), especially in the case of victims of all sorts of violence as was the case of a large part of the sample.

Particular attention was given to the dialogues and expressions used in order to ensure that the focus was on the participants' experiences. The feedback cycle was constantly carried out, by comparing the answers given by the participants and by adding topics of analysis that emerged from the interviews. This proved to be very useful to better understand the experience of becoming a refugee woman and the differences and similarities of the participants' perspectives on it. In fact, a feedback loop can enrich the data collected by providing a better understanding of the interviewees' perception and meaning attributed to situations or happenings (Schenke et al., 2017).

It is crucial for researchers to identify their responsibility in a project, and to guarantee a much-needed integrity to explore the interactions with the participants, with as little bias or personal considerations as possible. This is the only means to protect the up-and-coming, transmutative, and extremely scrutinized complexity of research (Attia & Edge, 2017). Nevertheless, to successfully collect more profound and rich data, the first author had to adopt a flexible role, steering when the interviewee drifted from the main question or shared personal experiences with little relevance to the research. Accordingly, when participants perceive the researcher as being fully engaged in the dialogue and storytelling taking place, then the information provided by the participants is more likely to be more powerful, deep, and detailed (Råheim et al., 2016).

Researchers must acknowledge and integrate their questions with discursive clues from the participants in their questions which allow them to be understood at a deeper level, i.e., personal experiences; points of view; prejudices; theoretical, political, and ideological attitudes; emotional responses, etc. (Korstjens, & Moser, 2018). Similarly, the first author always worked hard to capture the background and the worldviews of the participants. Likewise, she tried to adapt her speech in terms of language and the formulation of questions so her speech could be as comprehensible as possible for the participants, while, at the same time, following the most rigorous norms and methodological rigor, and respect for the participants.

3.4 The Ordeals of Collecting Data During a Global Pandemic

In March 2020, the OMS declared a pandemic due to the global spread of COVID-19. This caused unprecedented containment and sanitary measures worldwide, as well as unique opportunities and challenges for researchers conducting qualitative research, particularly because lockdowns and social distancing limited all sorts of face-to-face interaction and studies (Lobe et al., 2020). This was also the case for the mentioned study, mostly because between March 2020 and the beginning of 2021 it was not possible to conduct any face-to-face interviews. Lobe et al. (2020) stressed the importance of including reflections about the impact of COVID-19 in research conducted during the pandemics, considering both the impact it had upon themselves but also on the participants living through such uncertain times.

The authors of this chapter had to expand and reimagine methodological options for their study, and to search for alternative ways to collect data from participants. And although online methods in research are not new to scientific and academic research (Pang et al., 2018), special attention had to be given throughout the process, including adapting ethical procedures when transitioning research to online platforms (Lobe et al., 2020), such as ensuring the privacy of participant's identity and the confidentiality and security of data. Those concerns were also considered in Lobe et al.'s study (2020) who reviewed the latest videoconferencing services available to researchers and provided guidance on which services might best suit a project's needs.

Using the guidelines of these authors, the first concern regarding the privacy of participants' identity was safeguarded through a meticulous search of "(...) *the privacy, confidentiality, and data collection policies of all platforms and services.*" (Lobe et al., 2020, p. 5). Looking closely at the study of Archibald et al. (2019) on the feasibility and acceptability of using Zoom to collect qualitative interview data within a health research context, a decision was made to use this platform to conduct the online interviews. Zoom platform has the option to provide a password to access the meeting as well as a waiting room preventing nonauthorized people to access the ongoing meeting (Lobe et al., 2020).

Prior to the conduction of the interviews, online meetings with the participants and the translators (in the cases needed) were schedule to inform the refugee women about the technicalities involved, i.e., how to use the Zoom platform and its tools, and asked if they felt comfortable and safe enough to be part of the current research. The participants were also informed on the fact that all data (i.e., personal information, interview transcripts, researchers' personal notes) would be password protected in the researcher's personal computer and would not be shared or saved in online platforms. This was, obviously, a way to prevent any form of hacking or leaking of the data collected. As also suggested by Lobe et al. (2020), the recording of the interviews for research purposes was always made explicit in the verbal information given to participants, as well as in the informed consent. Participants were also informed that the audio recordings of the interviews would only be kept until their transcription and would be deleted after that and they were also reassured that they could withdraw from participating in the research if they wished to do so and that, subsequently, the image and sound recordings would be immediately deleted.

Furthermore, the potential presence of third parties who are not participants that may place the refugee women under any form of danger also needed to be considered and planned for. Likewise, during the first meetings, the importance of the participants to be alone during the interviews was stressed, but ultimately that decision was left in their hands so that the participants did not feel coerced or forced by the researcher to avoid revictimization or additional trauma (Surmiak, 2018). Nonetheless, as a safety measure, the first author agreed with the refugee women on a "safe word" that they would pronounce to let the researcher know that they were not able to continue the interview due to the interference of others. In that case, the interview would stop immediately. Another word was agreed on if the participants felt at risk in any way and needed the researcher to call the police. These two different words were never used during the conduction of the interviews.

Additionally, the authors made the choice that the interviews would only be conducted by video call, that is, by having access to real-time images of the participants. This would allow the first author to read the body language of the interviewees to recognize distress or discomfort due to the unwanted presence of other people in the same room and would allow her to adapt the course of the interaction if that was the case. Again, this type of situation never occurred during the conduction of the interviews.

The participants were also given the option to use a Zoom predesign background if they felt more comfortable not showing their houses, an option that was not made

by any participant. Likewise, the first author also decided to show, as background, her living room with her personal items (i.e., books, flowers, sofa, photos), and even her cats. This personal choice was based on the fact that it is fundamental for researchers to demonstrate that they are fully engaged with the interviewees (Surmiak, 2018), and, so, showing a cozier and more familiar environment as a background was crucial to establish empathy and rapport with them.

The interviews were among three “windows” from three screens: the first author, the interviewees, and the translators, who were in three different locations. Like the first author and the participants, the translators were asked to keep their cameras on, and they also decided to share their personal spaces (as they also conducted the translation from their homes) as their backgrounds. As expected, there were situations of bad internet connection, breakups, and poor sound/video quality. Despite that, conducting online interviews was advantageous and turned out to be very prolific, allowing the authors to reach out to participants in distant geographical locations from the north to the south of Portugal, to enlarge the sample size, and to save a lot of time and money in commuting and traveling, which would not be possible if the interviews were conducted in person.

There is also an ethical obligation to ensure that no individuals or communities can be identified and subsequently harmed or stigmatized because of the research. Since the ethics committee did not provide any sort of safety protocol regarding online interviewing, the authors of this chapter defined some measures that would be adopted to guarantee the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data collected. Instead of saving the recordings online, the Zoom platform also provides local storage in the PC files, and this added measure was taken in this study so the data collected would not be available online, and therefore, it would be more difficult to access by outsiders to the study. Adding to this, all possible personal identifiers (i.e., first or last names, phone numbers, institutional details) were removed from transcriptions, recordings, or any other materials to prevent “*any linkage between the data collected*” (Lobe et al., 2020, p.5) and the participants. It is also important to stress that the first author did the transcriptions of all the interviews by herself, as an added protection measure of the participant’s identity.

4 Conclusion

As showcased in this chapter, the mentioned study on the process of becoming a refugee woman faced some limitations most related to the objectivity of scientific knowledge. These limitations correspond, above all, to those related to any investigation that uses qualitative methodologies. But, in particular, to those arising from the application of data collection techniques that require a more intimate relationship between the researcher and the subjects studied. The knowledge produced under these conditions is the object of questioning, and often of doubt, especially among apologists for epistemologies with a positivist bent, in terms of the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the results obtained in these investigations.

For these epistemologies, in general terms, validity, reliability, and objectivity come from the suppression of any subjective interpretations and arguments in the production of knowledge (Imai, 2017). But, in reality, qualitative researchers are interested in knowing the experiences, opinions, expectations, values, and perceptions of the participants, and in doing so, to accomplish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, that create the trustworthiness of the research (Chandra & Shag, 2017).

To follow these qualitative goals, the authors paid considerable attention and importance to the reflexivity exercised throughout the conducting of the study that had a significant effect on its development and improvement. The function of reflexivity involves the awareness of its processes with, first, the purpose of enriching the lived experience and, secondly, articulating this awareness as a contribution to the deepening understanding of the field. Although the main data presented in this chapter are related to the methodological challenges faced by the first author during the fieldwork, it should be noted that the second author assumed a crucial role in the reflexivity process. As demonstrated in this chapter, the adoption of an interactive reflexive research process where the first and the second authors debated the challenges faced extensively, allowed the first author to engage in a continuous process of scrutiny and critical interpretation, not only in relation to the participants and the context of the research but also to herself, which is the substrate of the ethical dimensions of research practice. These first and second authors' interaction played a key role that allowed the first author to guarantee compliance with informed consent and respect for the autonomy, dignity, and privacy of the participants, and, at the same time, to ensure her integrity, so that the results achieved in this study can be considered trustworthy.

However, there are some aspects that the authors did not consider while conducting the study presented in this chapter that they would like to point out as possible elements to be taken into account by other researchers. No contact was made with the refugee women after the conduction of the interviews, which the authors feel would have been important, in order to fully track the impact of participating in the study on them. The same must be said in relation to the translators, who were not asked about the impact of the refugee women's testimonies on themselves. Likewise, no specific protocol for protecting them was thought off or implemented. Because the translators had prior experience in sensitive research, these aspects were not considered by the authors, but it would have been cautious to ask how they managed their emotions during and after the interviews. The authors also regret that they were not able to send the research results to the participants, since the doctoral thesis was written in English, and most of the refugee women do not speak English. However, the authors hope to soon be able to list the main conclusions of the study in a document written in French and Arabic, so that, albeit in a summarized form, they can have access to the study's main results.

In sum, the study explored throughout this chapter followed a constructivist approach that contemplates the achievement of trustworthiness in research through a balance of reflexivity and subjectivity, as stressed by Williams and Morrow (2009). In this sense, reflexivity was a crucial activity that sharpened and deepened, in one

hand, the authors' awareness of the understandable countenance of their ethics as individuals conducting research, and one the other, the need to constantly navigate between the much-desired objectivity and the inevitable subjectivity that arises from the relationship created between the researcher and the participants.

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Part IV
The Violent

Chapter 18

Gangs: Fieldwork Experiences, Ethical Dilemmas, and Emotions in Youth Street Groups Research



Carles Feixa 

1 Introduction

The concept of the gang is complex and multifaceted, encompassing a range of groups from informal associations of young people to organized crime syndicates, often with hybrid forms in between. Researchers from diverse disciplines, including anthropology, criminology, sociology, forensic psychology, and social communication, have studied gangs over the years. This chapter draws on over four decades of field research with street youth groups in Spain and Latin America, with a specific focus on two large-scale projects: the JOVLAT project on “Latino gangs” in Barcelona (Feixa et al., 2006), and the TRANSGANG project on transnational gangs as agents of mediation in 12 cities across southern Europe, North Africa, and the Americas (Feixa et al., 2019). For a more comprehensive understanding of the methodology and ethical frameworks employed in these projects, readers are referred to the respective publications.¹

Gangs are gangs, wherever they are found. They represent a specific type or variety of society, and one thing that is particularly interesting about them is the fact that they are, in respect to their organization, so elementary, and in respect to their origin, so spontaneous. (Park, preface to Thrasher, 1927/1936: ix)

¹JOVLAT: *Jóvenes de origen latinoamericano en Barcelona*, Municipality of Barcelona and Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, 2005–2008; TRANSGANG: *Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation, Experiences of conflict resolution among youth street youth in Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Americas*, European Research Council, 2018–2023. The materials produced within the framework of the second project can be consulted on the TRANSGANG website: www.upf.edu/web/transgang

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A gang is an informal group of locally rooted peers, in conflict with other peer groups and sometimes with adult institutions. Even if crime is not the central issue for the formation of the gang, police and political approaches in the United States have reinforced its criminal dimensions. When offending is not considered a fundamental attribute of a group of youngsters, other terms are used, such as peer group, street group, subculture, counterculture, and lifestyle, reserving the term “gang” for those street youth groups labeled as marginalized, with a majority of members coming from ethnic minorities or migrant backgrounds, and not using it in general to designate other youth groups. For this reason, when defining a gang, it is mandatory to refer both to the use of the term made by informants and native actors—to its *emic* meanings—and its use by researchers and external actors—its *etic* meanings. In addition, terms and meanings may vary depending on the geographic locations and subcultural traditions we consider (Feixa & Sánchez-García, 2022).

On the one hand, from an *emic* point of view, the term is polysemic. In Europe—as in the United States—the term “gang” tends to have a pejorative meaning associated with crime, which is juxtaposed to other terms of local use. However, each youth group can use different categories to define itself. In Barcelona, the Latin Kings refer to themselves as “nation,” while the Ñetas are defined as “association” and the Trinitarios and DDP as “coros” [choirs]; in San Salvador, the Salvatrucha is a “mara” while the 18 is a “pandilla” or a “barrio”; in the case of the North African region, young people do not use a special name, but the identification of the neighborhood. In addition, some street youth groups propose to use the term “street family” to avoid the term “gang” and denote the horizontal relationships (fraternity) and vertical relationships (authority) that exist between them.

On the other hand, from an *etic* point of view, the criminological tradition coming from the Chicago School has tended to use the term “gang” as a synonym for street youth groups related to criminal activities. How we define “gang” will determine the number and composition of its members, whether we opt for broad, peer-group-focused definitions that bring together younger people as if we opt for restricted definitions—focused on illegal activities—that present a conceptualization that incorporates fewer young people. Another issue relates to the “labeling” process associated with youth gang research that helps shape the way social issues and problems are framed. This perspective—known as “*gang talk*”—highlights the fact that, if we approach gangs as a social problem, we detract from fundamental issues such as racism, poverty, and social inequality. This perspective is represented by some academic researchers articulated around Malcolm Klein’s definition, developed in the 1970s in Los Angeles: “A gang is a group of young people who can be identified by: (a) being perceived as a different group from the others in the neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a defined group, and (c) be involved in several criminal episodes that generate a constant negative reaction from neighbors and/or law enforcement services” (Klein, 1971: 13). It is in this direction, Eurogang—a network of North American and European researchers—inspired among others by Klein himself, proposed the following definition: “A street gang (or troublesome youth group), is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activities is part of the group’s identity” (Esbensen & Maxson, 2012: 5).

Another perspective of studying gangs is the Latin American tradition, understanding them as social formations that intend to build cultural citizenship from the margins. Thus, Reguillo (1995) points out the community character of these experiences of youth that find in the neighborhood a territorial dimension of inscription, and the importance of their symbolic production. Perea (2007) demonstrates that a gang generates a time and space parallel to the codes that govern the society of citizens from which subordinate young people are disconnected. In addition, Valenzuela (2007) traces the presence of the *maras* within the framework of a cross-border cultural resistance from migration and the historical nexus between Central America and the United States. Accordingly, a definition that tries to collect all these attributes is the one proposed by David Brotherton and Luis Barrios in their monograph on the Latin Kings & Queens of New York: “Groups formed largely by youth and adults from marginalized classes, whose objective is to provide their members with an identity of resistance, an opportunity for empowerment both individually and collectively, a possible ‘voice’ capable of challenging the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and sufferings of daily life in the ghetto, and, finally, a spiritual enclave in which practices and rituals considered sacred can be developed” (Brotherton & Barrios, 2003: 23). Finally, John Hagedorn, who has written extensively on the process of gang globalization, reminds us that gangs today are far from being stable, clearly defined entities:

Today’s youth gang might become a drug posse tomorrow or, in some places, even transform into an ethnic militia or a vigilante group the next day. The changing nature of gangs poses problems, but it also offers opportunities to reduce violence and evolve some gangs into social movements. Gangs, in other words, are one of many kinds of groups that are socialized in the prisons and streets and not by conventional institutions.

(Hagedorn, 2008: xxv).

2 Fieldwork Experiences

As a researcher, I have devoted nearly four decades to studying youth gangs, while my personal experience observing these groups dates back more than 50 years to my childhood, when I belonged to “little gangs” in my neighborhood. Over the course of my career, I have undertaken five distinct field experiences that have had a profound impact on my research. These experiences have involved diverse types of gangs, varied geographical and historical contexts, and a range of research techniques.

2.1 *Los Mataperros (Lleida, Catalonia, 1984)*

Perro: The teachers could not see us because we were the *golfos* [hooligans] of the school and always the rules did not do well. They told us “Don’t smoke” and then we would go there and smoke in the bathroom.

Liebre: What we do are *golferías* [hooliganism], for instance, go out in the night, steal some videos, throw logs at the police, ha, ha.
(Los Mataperros, Lleida, focus group, 1984)

The first “gang” I investigated in my undergraduate thesis on the “urban tribes” in my city—Lleida, a medium-sized city in the interior of Catalonia—was a group of teenagers who lived in an impoverished old neighborhood and participated in activities of the open center for young people in the neighborhood (Feixa, 1985). It was composed of a dozen boys between 14 and 18 years old, from Roma or mixed families, most of whom had dropped out of school, but still did not have a stable occupation, although many of them helped their parents in the street trade. Some afternoons they went to the open center of the neighborhood, where they participated in activities promoted by street educators—a profession then emerging and scarcely bureaucratized.

After spending some time with them, I proposed to record a collective interview about their belonging to the group, although I was not aware at the time that I was applying the focus group technique. It should be said that in the 1980s, the so-called *Quinqui* gangs were fashionable, composed of young Roma linked to petty crime and heroin trafficking, one of whose cinematographic icons—*El Vaquilla*—had family ties in Lleida, in whose prison he served his sentence and where he starred in a spectacular escape.²

2.2 *La Palma Street Gang (Lleida, Catalonia, 1950s)*

We were [the gang] from La Palma Street: this would be our country. The place of operations was the square: this was the territory of distribution of the various tribes that existed. It was a continuous transhumance: exploring, possessing more territory, summoning us to throw stones. If there had been the current attitude towards the world of the young, we would have been the typical delinquents, the typical groups that would worry the well-thinking or morally established classes, right?
(Antoni, Lleida, interview, 1988)

In my doctoral thesis on the oral history of youth under Francoism (Feixa, 1990), I investigated a gang that existed in a popular square in the same city during the post-war years. One of my informants, a psychologist descended from a family that emigrated from southern Spain in the 1940s and settled in precarious housing in the old town, shared her experience of participating in a gang at the end of the 1950s on the same street where I later lived. This gang was composed of a variety of rituals of integration and separation that were similar to those I had read about in books about gangs.

²Juan José Moreno Cuenca, *aka* “El Vaquilla,” was a young delinquent, from Roma origin, famous because he was the protagonist in a series of B-movies on his own life. He died of cirrhosis during a stay in prison in 2003.

After this preadolescent stage, the informant went on to join the Boy Scouts and anti-Franco groups, and studied psychology, which allowed her to vividly recall this early stage of her life. Her testimony is a clear demonstration that youth gangs are not a recent or imported phenomenon, but have deep roots in Spanish urban history, particularly in relation to internal migration processes.

2.3 *Los Mierdas Punks (Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, México City, 1991)*

The environment transforms the ideas and the people. It is not the same to get depressed here [in Neza] than to get depressed in the [Federal] District. See the asphalt where thousands of cars go, people here and there. All that pace of life make you think about other things. There you cannot see a pint like here, punk badges “who knows what gang” or “the gang of the crazy” ... The most direct relationship I’ve always had with pure “*chavos banda*” [gang kids] because I can’t live with other people.

(Diana, México City, interview, 1991)

During my postdoctoral stay in Mexico City, I had the opportunity to study the Mierdas Punks, a subculture of young people living in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, a large residential neighborhood located in the eastern part of the Federal District. In the 1980s, the Mexican metropolis experienced the phenomenon of the “*chavos banda*,” urban-popular young people linked to their self-construction colonies, who in response to the economic and value crisis began to dress in strange outfits: “*jipitecas*, *rockers*, and *punketas*.” They were distinguished from the so-called *chavos fresa* [strawberry kids], young middle-class with a mainstream aesthetic. The two most famous gangs were the *Panchitos* of Santa Fe and the *Mierdas Punks* of Neza. I met the latter when the glorious times had passed, but their protagonists were still young and eager to tell their stories.

More than a gang, the *Mierdas* was a federation of local gangs located in different neighborhoods of Ciudad Neza. In this context, I used a variety of ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, analysis of audiovisual material, and above all, the life stories of three of its emblematic members: Pablo “El Podrido,” Diana, and El Iti (Feixa, 1998a, b; Feixa & Valle, 2022).

2.4 *Almighty Latin King & Queen Nation (Barcelona-Nueva York-Quito, 2005)*

CF: What is a Nation for you?

KM: A group of people who are governed by a single government, race, constitution, and laws. We live here in a nation in which we have a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, advisor, chief of war, teachers who teach, our policies, and regulations, we have a supreme court, judges... Within our organization, we live in one Nation within the other Nation.

(King Manaba, Barcelona, focus group, 2005)

The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) was the focus of my fourth field investigation. It is worth noting that the members of this group reject the label “gang” and prefer to be called a “nation.” ALKQN is a transnational street organization that originated in the streets of Chicago in the early 1960s as part of the second generation of young Latinos in the United States. The organization was reborn in the 1980s in New York as a Nation and aligned itself with the civil rights movement. In the 1990s, ALKQN expanded to countries like Ecuador due to the US government’s deportation policies. ALKQN arrived in Spain in the year 2000 when an Ecuadorian Latin King emigrated to Madrid. Soon after, it was established in Barcelona and other European cities by other members (Brotherton & Barrios, 2003). The group came to public attention in 2003 when its then leader appeared on a television program, and a young Colombian was allegedly murdered by a rival group—the *Netas*—in Barcelona.

As a result of this event, and my previous publications, the director of the crime prevention office of the Barcelona City Council requested me to commission an in-depth research on the topic of ALKQN. As a result, I led an interdisciplinary team who conducted ethnographic research in 2005, using a variety of techniques (participant observation, media analysis, focus groups with young students, stakeholder interviews, in-depth interviews with young Latinos, and interviews with members, among others). The result of this study was the book *Young Latinos in Barcelona* (“*Jóvenes latinos en Barcelona*,” Feixa et al., 2006). In addition, a silver lining of this study was the possibility to initiate contact with leaders of two rival organizations, and therefore begin a mediation process that resulted in the constitution of two associations, a process that had a great academic, media, and social impact (Ballesté & Feixa, 2022). Much later, I published the biography of the *King* who led this process (Feixa & Andrade, 2020).

2.5 *Transnational Gangs (Barcelona-Rabat-Medellín, 2022)*

In 2009, the unexpected happens: Kolacho is murdered. During a struggle for territorial control between gangs from two neighborhoods, a motorcycle passed by shooting and with a single shot in the head, they took his life. That day changed the lives of all of us. Kolacho was 21 years old, he was a very young boy, full of desire to study, desire to do many things, and rap. And since that day I am part of C15, which is still my current band, my rap band.³ (Jeihhco, Medellín, interview, 2020)

The final area of my research – since 2018 – focuses on transnational gangs in 12 cities across southern Europe, North Africa, and Latin America. These groups represent a diverse range of street youth organizations impacted by transnational processes, and can be found in urban peripheries and other impoverished areas across

³ In Spanish, the term “gang” [*banda*] means street gang and also music band.

the globe. Despite differences in their makeup, these transgangs share common features such as street codes, globalized musical and aesthetic symbols, universal stigmatization, criminalization, and an affiliation with the global hip-hop culture. Our team of approximately 30 researchers, including 12 local researchers, some of whom are ex-gang members, works together to study these groups (Feixa et al., 2019, 2020b).

My primary role in this project is to lead the research team, and over the past 5 years, I have conducted ethnographic visits to most of the cities where we have carried out our research. However, our most in-depth study to date has taken place in Medellín, where we collected the life story of Jeihhco, one of the founders of *Casa Kolacho*. This story serves as a metaphor for the transformations that gangs, both criminal and musical, have undergone in the city since the death of Pablo Escobar (Feixa et al., 2022). Our research is critical in understanding the complexities of transnational gangs and the cultural and social processes that shape their formation and evolution.

3 Fieldwork and Techniques

3.1 Phases of the Fieldwork

In traditional research, three distinct phases are typically identified: entry, permanence, and exit. However, when studying gangs, there are some important nuances to consider. Firstly, instead of referring to this process as “fieldwork,” it is more appropriate to use the term “asphalt or concrete work” given that this research is often conducted in an urban context, necessitating extensive and partial participant observation. Secondly, these phases are often discontinuous, with a continuous entry and exit from the field, as researchers must adapt to the rhythms of the people and groups they are studying, which are marked by emotional changes, migratory processes, and entrances and exits of penitentiary or correctional centers. Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that emotional involvement with the individuals being studied means that one can never truly leave the field, as researchers may become friends, confidants, confessors, and even scientific tutors. This has been my experience as well, as I currently supervise Queen Maverick, the Godmother of the Latin Kings & Queens in Spain, on her doctoral thesis exploring women in gangs.

To enter the field, I needed to count on gatekeepers, that is, people who already benefited from the trust of the target group. Overall, my gatekeepers were street educators from my neighborhood, a priest who had worked with the boy scouts, a researcher on punk music, the director of a house for the youth where the Latin Kings met, and a rapper of *Casa Kolacho* who I met by the coincidence in a conference about peace studies. In that regard, chance should not be underestimated; for instance, my contact with my future participant was facilitated by a spontaneous encounter in a rock and roll market in Mexico or the raid of 200 police officers in

Barcelona. Earning participants' trust depends on the soft skills of the researcher but also on the will of the studied group. In general, I have been very lucky in accessing the field, as most of my attempts have been successful. However, there are two groups that I could not enter: first, the gang of the Ñetas initially opened their doors to me, but due to internal disagreements, they finally refused to be investigated. Second, the rank-and-file members of the Trinitarios de Lleida—one contemporary gang, most famous in Spain for their confrontations with the gang Dominicans Don't Play—sought my help, but when they asked the leaders for permission to be interviewed, the latter did not authorize it. It was later learned that some of the leaders were involved in petty crimes.

In my view, the researcher should know when to enter, but not when to leave, unless they are only going to extract information. I keep in touch with most of my informants. Sadly, some of them passed away, but with the rest I still meet when I have the occasion and with others I keep contact online. For instance, I meet from time to time with King Manaba—who no longer works as a research assistant—and a few months ago, I traveled with him to his hometown in Ecuador, and I was able to meet his family and his son—whom he had not seen since he emigrated to Barcelona, leaving him with Manaba's mother.

3.2 *Multiplicity of Techniques*

I have combined a variety of ethnographic techniques in my five field experiences, which I briefly review herein.⁴ First, *participant observation* is a crucial ethnographic technique for studying gangs, involving the observation and description of daily routines and social interactions within the group. This method was used in two landmark studies of gang culture: Whyte's (1943) research on the street-corner boys of an Italian-American neighborhood in Boston in the 1930s and Monod's (1968) study of Parisian blouson noirs in the 1960s. Participant observation allows researchers to closely follow the dynamics of the group and its relationships with the wider social environment. However, this technique can be time-consuming and challenging, as it requires building rapport with gang members to gain access to their private spaces and daily routines. Additionally, observation alone may not fully capture the subjective experiences and perceptions of gang members. In my own research on the Latin Kings, I utilized both nonparticipant and participant observation. Initially, my team observed the public places where the gangs were known to meet, as well as the schools attended by their members. With the acceptance of the gang leaders, I was able to conduct intensive participant observation in forbidden spaces, such as meetings, coronation ceremonies, truces with other gangs, and interactions with police, institutions, and the media. I observed the gang's regular meeting place,

⁴See Feixa (2018). The methodological design of the JOVLAT project can be consulted in Feixa et al. (2006). That of the TRANSGANG project in Feixa et al. (2020b).

local markets, and even visited the homes of gang members, as well as prisons in several countries. My observations began in specific locations on the urban periphery of Barcelona but later expanded into a transnational, multisite ethnography, following gang members to other cities where the gang had a presence, such as Genoa, New York, Chicago, and Quito. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of gang culture and its transnational dimensions.

Second, the latter can be completed with the *focus group technique*, which allows the completion of the external point of view (*etic*) with the native assessments (*emic*). The focus group can be defined as a collective interview, that is, a conversation around the gangs in which a small group of informants (between five and ten) voluntarily participate. In addition to capturing general information, it allows highlighting the social perceptions on the subject among the target group. Throughout my academic pursuits, I have conducted focus groups with three distinct groups: young nonmembers of gangs typically in school settings, rank-and-file members, and leaders of one or more gangs. In addition, I have also referred to a spontaneous focus group with members of the Mataperros. In a separate study focusing on young Latinos in Barcelona, we utilized this same technique in secondary schools to gather the opinions of young nonmembers. Furthermore, in the TRANSGANG project, we have conducted focus groups in multiple cities, typically featuring mixed groups consisting of both members and nonmembers, boys and girls alike.

Third, *in-depth interviews* with current or former members of the groups are crucial to gain insight into the origin, characteristics, and evolution of the group, as well as information about the members and their trajectories of entry, belonging, and exit. These interviews can be nondirected, semi-directed, or directed, with the latter being the most prevalent. When studying different gangs in a specific area, it is necessary to gather input from multiple groups. For example, in the JOVLAT project, we conducted interviews with members and former members of the two largest gangs in Barcelona at the time, the Latin Kings and Ñetas, who were rival gangs. In the TRANSGANG project, we conducted roughly 100 in-depth interviews with members of three types of gangs: criminal, recreational, and hybrid. Our aim was to include a diverse range of identities and phases, including minor and adult members, initiates and veterans, boys and girls, active members, and former members.

Sometimes, in-depth interviews can turn into *life stories* that require multiple conversations over time and comparisons with other biographical data. Autobiographical imagination is a research technique where an informant shares their life story and the researcher asks questions to develop an oral narrative (Feixa, 2018, 2021). I have collected around 50 life stories from gang members in Catalonia, Mexico, and Colombia, and three of them have had a significant academic and social impact. The first was a comparative study on the punk subculture in two countries, based on the life stories of two young punks from Lleida and Mexico City (Feixa, 1998a). The second was a compilation of conversations held with a leader of the Latin Kings of Barcelona over 15 years (Feixa & Andrade, 2020). The third was a more detailed and linear account, the result of half a dozen interviews over a few months with a prominent member of the *Mierdas Punk* de Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl

(Feixa & Valle, 2022). In all the cases, copyright profits were shared with the protagonists, and in the second and third cases, the authorship too.

Other types of *interviews* are those directed to *stakeholders*. These involve adult informants who have personal or professional contact with gangs or have specific perceptions about them due to their work in a related field. For instance, relatives, social workers, police officers, street or prison educators, policymakers, members of NGOs, or journalists. The objective of these interviews is threefold: to gather information on the social or police work carried out by the state or nonstate actors—the so-called right and left hand,⁵ of the state—to understand the sociopolitical context in which gangs operate, and to establish contacts so that the study's conclusions can have an impact on public policies. In the JOVLAT project, these interviews were the starting point, and the study began with a seminar that invited all the professionals involved in the field, including the prevention service of the city council, which commissioned the study, street educators of the city council, the specialized regional police unit, Latin American entities of Barcelona, and researchers. In the TRANSGANG project, we aim to disseminate the results of the White Paper on Gang Policies (Feixa et al., 2023). In a final conference, various stakeholders participated, such as the Ombudsman for minors of the Government of Catalonia, representatives of the police, Latin American NGOs, and international organizations. The purpose of the congress was to discuss the White Paper and its recommendations.

As cinematic imagery has influenced gangs from *Los Olvidados* to *West Side Story*, *ethnographic video* techniques can serve as a valuable complement or guiding thread to studies. In my own research in Mexico, I was preceded by filmmakers who documented the lives of punks. In the JOVLAT project, we collaborated with film students to produce a documentary. In the TRANSGANG project, we have systematically used cinema by producing three documentaries from workshops with young people in the central cities of Barcelona, Rabat, and Medellín (Mecca & Feixa, 2022).

In today's digital age, gangs not only exist in physical public spaces but also interact in online social networks, known as cyber corners. Therefore, it is crucial to study them using *virtual ethnography* techniques that understand the internet as both technology and culture (Hines, 2000). This means analyzing it as a space for interaction through technological devices and as a place that shapes lifestyles and gang culture. In the TRANSGANG project, we conducted a study on the relationship between gangs and social networks by combining big data analysis with case studies on Facebook (Fernández-Planells et al., 2021).

Another effective method for understanding youth gangs is through *oral history* that can be utilized during the participant observation periods. This involves

⁵ Bourdieu calls “the left hand” to the social care services of the State to avoid violence and “right hand” as the repressive ways of the State to content social dissidences. It is interesting to observe how these “right and left hands” of the State are also given a vision of gender. Thus, the right would be related to masculinity (punishment), while the left to the feminine side (care) (Bourdieu, 1992/2002).

gathering accounts of the history of street gangs from local informants, allowing for a contextualization of their specific circumstances and location. Since gang activity often leaves little other evidence beyond the experiences of those involved, oral history is a valuable tool for gathering information. However, other sources such as media research and judicial or criminal archives can also be useful. Through oral history, it is possible to challenge common stereotypes that portray gangs as a recent phenomenon caused by immigration or media trends. By delving into the deeper historical roots of gang activity, we can gain a better understanding of the complex social factors that contribute to the formation and persistence of these groups.

In that regard, the *analysis of media reports* has proven to be a useful technique, although it should be used with caution. While it can provide a valuable source of information on gang activity, it is important to note that they are often biased and may rely on uncorroborated sources, as well as focus on tragic events involving gang members. It is important to recognize that media representations can have serious consequences, both for shaping public perceptions of gang members and for influencing criminal justice policies. For instance, in our study of Latino gangs in Barcelona, we dedicated a chapter to the analysis of media representations, highlighting the fact that the press can often “construct” reality rather than simply reflecting it (Recio & Cerbino, 2006). Similarly, in our current research on transnational gangs, we have focused on examining media representations as a key factor in shaping public perceptions of these groups (Masanet et al., 2023). By critically analyzing media representations, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of gang activity and challenge negative stereotypes that contribute to the stigmatization of gang members.

To study gangs, researchers can use not only qualitative techniques but also quantitative techniques such as analyzing *official statistics* (demographic, police, or criminal data), conducting surveys, using social network analysis, and analyzing big data. For instance, in the JOVLAT project, researchers conducted a sociodemographic study on the Latin American community in Barcelona to challenge the stereotype that most young Latinos were involved in gangs. In the TRANSGANG project, a survey was conducted to understand the public perception of gangs, and Twitter debates were analyzed to study their impact (Guiteras et al., 2023).

Throughout all of my research, I have found that the most essential technique has been gathering life stories. I firmly believe that first-hand accounts from individuals who are or have been part of a gang are crucial. Without these personal testimonies, it is nearly impossible to fully comprehend the intricate dynamics of a gang’s inner workings, as well as their complex and often tumultuous relationship with society at large.

4 Ethical Aspects in Gang Research

The study of youth gangs requires special attention to ethical protocols to protect the participants and researchers and increase the benefits of the research for public policies and well-being. While in my first studies, the ethical approach was intuitive and based on respect for anonymity and the relationship of mutual trust established with the informants, the latest research has required the development of more systematic ethical protocols, because it is a requirement of funding agencies, but also because it is necessary when many researchers intervene and it is intended that the conclusions have an impact on public policies (Feixa et al., 2020a).⁶

The TRANSGANG project, which focuses on young people involved in criminal activity, developed protocols to safeguard the interests of everyone involved. This included consulting ethical literature and codes of conduct. It is worth noting that some scholars have strongly opposed the imposition of ethical frameworks that do not consider the diverse range of ethical ideas present in real social settings. This is because such frameworks may serve to protect institutional interests at the expense of research participants (Holmwood, 2010). On the other hand, some argue that ethical frameworks offer valuable resources for social researchers (Te Riele, 2012). In addition, in certain parts of the world, there are no specific ethical codes in place, and researchers often seek guidance from foreign ethical and legal frameworks. In our case, it was decided in agreement with the European Research Council, the project funder, to recruit an internal Ethics Advisory Board with expertise in managing research ethics in the context of ethnographic research. Consequently, it was agreed that all researchers involved in the project would adhere to the procedures laid out in the ethical protocol during all research phases. Researchers committed to situating their knowledge production and engaging in self-analysis to critically examine their role in the research process.

We recognized the importance of acknowledging how various dimensions, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, nationality, culture, and religion, impacted their fieldwork and the power dynamics in their relationships with participants. To build knowledge that was critical and independent of a colonial adult-centric perspective, the researchers utilized two crucial elements: reflexivity and placement. Through reflexivity, the researchers critically examined their own perspectives, assumptions, and biases that might have influenced their research. Placement involved situating oneself within the social field being studied and engaging in participatory research practices that sought to establish horizontal relationships with the participants. By doing so, the researchers recognized the participants as co-creators of the scientific knowledge, rather than passive subjects of study. The following ethical rules were followed:

- (a) Acknowledging participants as experts and recognizing their vital contribution to the research process.

⁶The following is based on a text in the press (Feixa et al., [In Press](#)).

- (b) Respecting and preserving participant privacy and integrity at all times.
- (c) Ensuring the safe storage of all data and information related to research participants.
- (d) Utilizing pseudonyms and other protective measures to safeguard participant identities.
- (e) Ensuring that participants are free to choose whether or not to participate in the research and to withdraw their participation at any time without needing to provide a reason.
- (f) Ensuring transparency by communicating research objectives and methods clearly, as well as explaining how collected data will be used.
- (g) Encouraging open communication by being available to answer questions and address concerns about the research process, both during and after the fieldwork is completed.

To ensure our ethical commitment, we diverged from the typical biomedical codes and applied protocols directly to the field without any modification. Our approach aimed to avoid any risks or uncertainties that could arise for both researchers and participants. We prioritized building trust and recognition with participants and ensuring their safety throughout the research process. Central to this approach was placing the participants at the core of the research and cultivating trust between them and the researchers, regardless of their age.

The rigor and quality of academic work in ethnographic research are dependent on the level of engagement of the researchers. However, the ability of the researcher to gather valuable information is heavily reliant on the trust they establish with their participants throughout the research process. Trust building is a crucial aspect of fieldwork that requires attention and effort. There are multiple perspectives and approaches to conceptualizing and establishing trust, but we have found that trust is primarily built through repeated positive experiences, formal or informal, over time within the context of long-standing relationships. Trust is built upon deepening knowledge and understanding of the other person. As a result, trust building is a gradual process that requires patience, understanding, and respect for participants' experiences and perspectives. Hosokawa's (2010) argument highlights the additional time and effort required to build trust when researchers and the research community perceive themselves as different due to factors such as gender, social class, culture, ethnicity, age, religion, or sexual identity. Trust is of paramount importance in ethnography as it is essential for obtaining access to information and field sites, obtaining accurate data, and understanding participants' worldviews and private lives. In order to foster trust and recognition, we aimed to establish a "trust process" that would prevent our project from being perceived as an extractive research project. This required empowering young people to exercise some degree of control over their involvement in the research by allowing them to opt out of some or all elements of the project.

To ensure ethical research practice, it is important for the researcher to obtain informed consent from participants before any project activity takes place. This involves explaining the research objectives and how the data collected will be used.

While written consent is preferred, it may not be appropriate in all circumstances, especially when working with marginalized groups or in contexts where signing a document may be perceived as unsafe. In such cases, alternative methods of obtaining consent such as testimonial consent and recorded oral consent can be used. However, regardless of the method used, it is crucial that the participant clearly understands the information provided and consents voluntarily. This can be ensured by allowing participants to ask questions and clarifying any doubts they may have before obtaining consent. Ultimately, obtaining informed consent in a manner that respects participants' autonomy and ensures their safety is a critical aspect of ethical research practice, particularly in the field of youth studies.

The age of the participant is an essential factor to consider in regard to consent. Researchers must comply with local laws and customs related to the age of consent for participation in research. However, the age at which people are considered capable of giving consent varies based on cultural, gender, class, and national contexts. There are no clear regulations specifying the age at which people can legally give consent for participation in research. Some countries have adopted the "Gillick competency" rule, which assumes that individuals under 16 years old who possess "sufficient understanding" can provide consent for medical interventions without parental interference. In the absence of legal guidelines regarding research participation, only individuals over the age of 16 were invited to participate in this study, based on the judgment that they are more likely to understand the information, consequences, and give informed consent.

The issue of obtaining parental permission is closely related to the problem of age requirements for research participation. Based on the Gillick competency, individuals over the age of 16 are considered capable of providing informed consent for themselves, which eliminates the need for parental or legal guardian consent. However, in normal circumstances, parents and legal guardians should still be informed by the local researchers about their child's or ward's participation in the project. In some cases, informing parents or legal guardians may put the child or young person at risk of harm, especially if they are involved in illegal activities. Ultimately, the decision to inform parents or legal guardians was left to the discretion of the local researchers, based on whether they already had the participant's permission and whether it was safe and appropriate not to inform parents. If the researcher deemed it unsafe, they were advised not to inform the parents and to document their reasoning in the next bimonthly ethics report. This approach aimed to prevent any potential ethnocentrism in the ethical guidelines by relying on the researchers' local knowledge and expertise.

During the fieldwork, it is imperative to agree to the terms of the collaboration with the target population. Deferred reciprocity has always been a core value for me: one must give and receive, not necessarily at the same time. Informants offer their testimony, their knowledge, and their time. In return, the researcher can contribute with his or her knowledge on a useful topic for the target population (e.g., music), emotional support, and the dissemination of the results of the studies. Although in Western ethnography, it is usual to pay informants, I have always tried to avoid economic remuneration, because, in my view, it usually creates a chain of

interests that can bias the result. Instead, I opted for other types of gifts such as records, clothes, and sharing a meal with the participants.

There was nevertheless one exception to this rule, and I agreed to pay Francisco Valle (*aka* El Iti) of the Mierdas Punks for the many hours he dedicated to me and for his subsequent work of editing his life story. In addition, I also incorporated some members of the groups as research assistants. This has not been a bed of roses though. For instance, I did not succeed in hiring as a research assistant a member of the Latin Kings and other of the *Ñetas* due to the negative of the funding institution. Fortunately, I have successfully implemented this idea in the TRANSGANG project, and been able to hire César Andrade (*aka* King Manaba) and María Oliver (*aka* Queen Maverick). César is in charge of facilitating contact with gang members, but also of transcribing interviews, assisting us in the interpretation of results and editing of a book. María works as a local researcher in Madrid and a doctoral student. In addition, three gang members who were participants in my research have also been hired for short periods, and they are also co-authors of the two books in which their biography is collected (Feixa & Andrade, 2020; Feixa & Valle, 2022). It is noteworthy that both were somewhat disappointed when they saw that the authors' profit is rather modest, which incidentally served to deny the prophecy that a policeman had launched when the Cultural Organization of the Latin Kings was constituted: that everything was done in order for an anthropologist like me to get rich by publishing a book.

5 Emotions, Risks, and Satisfactions

Researching gangs can be an exciting and challenging experience, comparable to an adventure sport. The researcher may encounter compromising situations that require quick thinking and action, which can lead to an increase in adrenaline. Ethical dilemmas may arise, but they can usually be managed effectively.⁷ Additionally, the study may have a positive impact on the individuals and groups being investigated, bringing a sense of satisfaction to the researcher.

At the beginning of the research, both the interviewer and the informant may feel nervous, but once a rapport is established, the experience can be therapeutic for both parties. While conducting fieldwork, the researcher may witness conflicts, such as fights, crimes, or police raids, but these events are not necessarily more frequent than those occurring in the neighborhoods or places being studied. Initially, the researcher may be accompanied by a gatekeeper, but once trust is established within the group, they are often protected by them. In my experience, any risky situations encountered were typically caused by external factors, rather than by the gang itself. For example, in Mexico, the researcher witnessed an attempt by the police to extort

⁷In the TRANSGANG project, we have a complete Risk Management Plan, approved by the ethics committee of the European Research Council (see Feixa et al., 2020a).

members of the “chavos banda” group, which ended when they realized the researcher’s presence. In Barcelona, access to the field was granted following a police raid, during which the leader of the Latin Kings gang contacted the researcher for assistance while they were surrounded by law enforcement.

In the initial meetings with the gang members, establishing trust was not an easy task for either party. As a researcher, there were concerns about whether they could be trusted, and on their part, they were wary of my intentions, wondering whether I was a policeman or a journalist looking for a sensational story. Although there were police officers who tried to undermine our work, we were able to establish a positive collaboration with many of them in attempts at mediation. However, our relationship with journalists was more challenging. We found that manipulation and sensationalism were often the norms, even in what we had considered serious media outlets. One of the most challenging aspects of this work is dealing with the aftermath of gang-related murders, as the mass media often turn to me for comments and insights. While it is crucial to respond and offer alternative perspectives to the criminal vision that often prevails, it can be emotionally taxing. Unfortunately, the police view is usually given more attention, even though I try to provide a more nuanced perspective. It is worth noting that disseminating my knowledge and insights is valued more by the gang members themselves than by the academic community. Ironically, academia tends to criticize those who engage with the media, but then judges them solely on those interventions, ignoring their contributions to academic publications.

One of my most significant disappointments occurred in 2015 when I heard on the radio that approximately 30 Latin Kings had been arrested in a raid, including my main informant. The news of this event was broadcast on all news channels, but when he was eventually acquitted of all charges 5 years later, only a digital media outlet published it. However, my most severe challenges have come from academics who have taken advantage of my good faith and assistance to enter the field, only to disregard the ethical protocols agreed upon with the group once inside. Furthermore, some have acted behind my back; at one point, an investigator whom I had excluded from my team for their unethical behavior spread false rumors about me among a gang, which put me at risk. As a result, I decided to temporarily leave the field.

On the other hand, I also experienced great moments of satisfaction throughout my research. One of my greatest moments of satisfaction was in 2005 when the Latin Kings called me to announce that the Catalan government had approved their statutes, and they were officially recognized as an organization. This announcement was attended by a hundred national and international media outlets, and it was an important step forward for the group. I was also deeply honored when I was given the title of “King Book,” which was an official recognition of my support for the group. Another salient moment was when I received news of acquittals for members of the group, such as when King Manaba’s lawyer called me during a criminology class to inform me of his acquittal. Another moment of pride was when I presented the book about the Mierdas Punks that I co-wrote with El Iti. During the presentation, El Chopo’s Tianguis Cultural, the market of the “chavos banda” in Mexico

City, some punks and El Iti's ex-girlfriend praised my work, which was a humbling experience.

Finally, I would like to discuss some moral dilemmas that I have faced. The main one concerns the sensitive information that I have access to through my work. I believe that it is important to have a clear limit on providing specific information to the police or authorities that could potentially harm whistleblowers, unless it involves serious crimes that may impact others (which has not been the case in my experience). However, I have always been open to sharing the conclusions of my research with anyone, as I believe that since it is funded by public funds, access should be open and the findings can have an impact on public policies. At one point, I was in contact with competent agents from CNI [Spanish National Intelligence Center] to whom I shared my research on Latin gangs and the youth of the Maghreb after the Arab Spring, without any compensation. I was even invited to the CNI headquarters in Madrid where I shared my insights with a hundred agents who were deployed throughout the country, many of whom had read my publications.

Additionally, I collaborated with the mediation services of the Catalan police [Mossos d'Esquadra] for a while. In both cases, I ensured that my informants were not put in contact with the authorities and sometimes even facilitated their meeting with the authorities. However, I refused to provide information to a local administration that only wanted it for territorial control measures, and disassociated myself from members of my team who did so without informing me. In addition, I acted as an expert witness in two trials. In the first trial, I was ignored because the Public Prosecutor wanted to establish a precedent for convicting a Latin gang of illicit association, even though there were no serious crimes involved. In the second trial, the judges listened to my testimony carefully and my contribution influenced the final acquittal of most of the charges brought by the Prosecutor's Office, who was influenced by a sector of the police in favor of the "mano dura" [tough on crime] approach.

6 Final Remarks

An essential ethical principle in qualitative research is reciprocity, especially when working with young people, who often provide researchers with insights into their lives that form the foundation of many social science studies. However, reciprocity goes beyond simply exchanging information during fieldwork; it is also a frame of reference that fosters mutual recognition and establishes trust and confidentiality. In all of the research projects that I have participated in, young gang members have been the primary focus, and their interests and perspectives have been central to the research process from start to finish. This approach reflects a broader concern among ethnographers that research should not exploit participants as mere sources of information but should also serve their interests. In this way, the research process can become a form of empowering social action that involves young people in every stage, from data collection to the presentation of results.

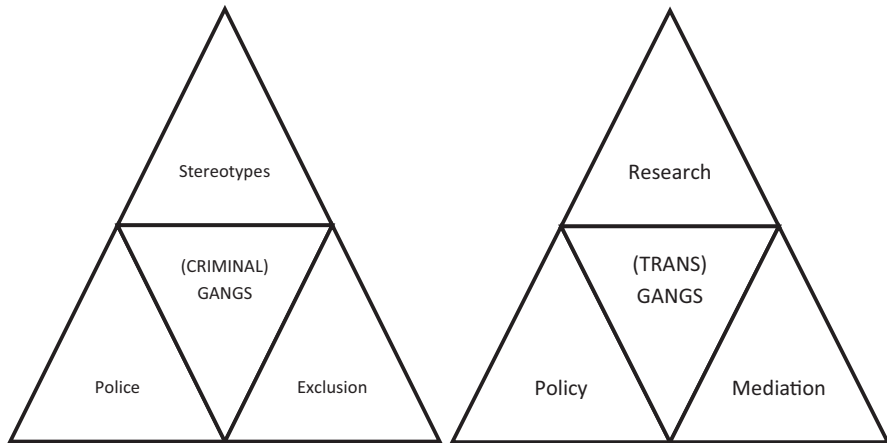


Fig. 18.1 The Bermuda Triangle versus the Magical Triangle

However, the question of whether empowerment is truly achievable for research participants, or whether it is merely an ideal in the researcher's mind, is an important one. To address this issue, the researcher can offer participants and other stakeholders a detailed analysis of political promises, the benefits and shortcomings of those promises, and the reasons for any discrepancies or differences between what was promised and what was delivered. This process of recognition, explanation, and analysis can help establish trust and accountability between participants and researchers, and foster a sense of reciprocity that benefits everyone involved.

Based on the insights gained from the research, an ethical framework can be synthesized, as shown in Fig. 18.1 (Oliart & Feixa, 2012). This framework identifies two opposing triangles: the “Bermuda Triangle” and the “Magical Triangle.” The Bermuda Triangle represents negative feedback from social and media representations (Stereotypes), the right hand of the State (Police), and the left hand of the State and civil society (Exclusion). Gangs are often portrayed as criminals and marginalized, and can be victims of physical extermination. In contrast, the Magical Triangle represents positive synergies between Academia (Research), the State (Policy), and Youth Work (Mediation). Through this framework, criminal gangs become visible as agents of mediation.

It is important to note that the framework acknowledges the complex and interconnected nature of the issues surrounding gangs and gang violence. The negative feedback loop of the Bermuda Triangle perpetuates stereotypes and exclusion, which in turn fuels criminal activity and further negative feedback. Conversely, the positive synergies of the Magical Triangle can break this cycle by empowering gangs as agents of mediation through research and policy, and supporting them through youth work programs. Overall, the framework highlights the need for a collaborative and holistic approach to addressing the issue of gangs and gang violence. By recognizing the agency of gang members and the importance of reciprocity in research, policy, and practice, we can work toward more ethical and effective solutions that benefit all stakeholders involved.

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Chapter 19

Exploring Organized Crime Beyond Institutional Sources



Ombretta Ingrascì 

1 Definition of the Phenomenon and Methodological Challenges

The Oxford dictionary defines *organized crime* as “Criminal activities that are planned and controlled by powerful groups and carried out on a large scale”.¹ However, other dictionaries provide a twofold definition, which includes the meaning of organized crime both as crime and as criminal associations². Ever since the academic and official debate began, the conceptualizing of organized crime has fluctuated between giving more attention to *criminal organizations* and concentrating on *criminal activities* (Paoli, 2018). This is not surprising given that changes in definitions over time are influenced by the specific historical context in which they are conceived (von Lampe, 2016). On the ground of a content analysis of 115 definitions of organized crime, Varese (2017) has recently shown that the definition has become increasingly broader over time. In the 1960s, Donald Cressey’s “mafia model” narrowly identified organized crime with a specific organization, “La Cosa Nostra”, the American mafia. This paradigm, through which organized crime was understood as a hierarchical and rational entity, was replaced first by the “enterprise model” – beginning in the 1970s – and later by the “network model” – as of the

¹https://www.lexico.com/definition/organized_crime

²See, for example, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, Boston/New York/London 1992. For a systematic review of official and academic definitions of organized crime, see the website created by von Lampe: <http://www.organized-crime.de/OCDefinitionsReview.htm>

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1990s. Both models have emphasised the flexibility of criminal groups' structure and the disorganization of illegal markets in which these groups operate.

The debate over the definition of organized crime is extremely wide. What is important to stress in this chapter is the fact that organized crime is “a vague umbrella concept that cannot be used, without specification, as a basis for empirical analyses, theory-building, or policymaking” (Paoli & Becken, 2018, p. 13). In other words, organized crime researchers should give operational definitions every time they use the term: they should specify what exactly they mean by organized crime, when dealing with it, rather than taking it for granted (Paoli, 2018). This chapter refers to a peculiar type of organized crime: mafias. Here, by mafias we mean underground organizations which are made up of various clans and organized according to various structures - from hierarchical to horizontal - (Catino, 2019), use violence and corruption to govern a given territory, carry out illegal activities, such as extortion and trafficking of illegal goods, provide entrepreneurs with illegal services, and show a great ability to maintain traditional values, while at the same time adapting to wider economic and sociocultural changes (Ingrascì, 2021).

Regardless of the different definitions one might employ, organized crime researchers share similar methodological challenges.³ Studying a secret, illegal, violent organization - which is most often interwoven with politics and the economy - is complex because these characteristics do not give researchers the possibility to observe it directly. Moreover, data on organised crime are mainly produced by public authorities and are not easily accessible. As Hobbs and Antonopolous (2014, p. 99) stressed: “Official data are the result of law enforcement activity, which in turn is the result of resource restrictions, the competency of agents, organizational priorities, and wider political priorities”. In addition, to obtain information, researchers need to establish a trustful relationship with investigators and public prosecutors and this might take a lot of time (von Lampe, 2016). Organised crime research risks being “time consuming”, especially when adopting qualitative methods, which in neoliberal academic contexts have the effect of driving away researchers who eventually tend to shift towards other fields of research (Hosford et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, organized crime research is a “large and diverse field” (Hosford et al., 2021), which includes – following Hobbs and Antonopolous' classification (2014) – quantitative and economic analysis, historical/archival studies, network analysis, ethnography, and interviewing (offenders, consumers/clients and victims).⁴

³ Specific attention to methodological issues related to organized crime has been scarcely given by scholars: apart from the pioneristic work by Cressey (1967), only in the last 20 years have handbooks started to dedicate chapters to methodological questions (Hobbs & Antonopoulos, 2014; von Lampe, 2016; Rawlinson, 2008), while some scholars have proposed reflections upon specific techniques of inquiry, including interviews (see for instance the special issue of *Trends in Organized Crime*, 2008), content analysis (Campana & Varese, 2012), network analysis (Berlusconi, 2013; Campana & Varese, 2022) and ethnography (Varese, 2022). For an overview on organized crime studies in recent years, see Tonry and Reuter (2020) and Windle and Silke (2019). For a systematic analysis of qualitative methods in mafia studies, see the recent work edited by Ingrascì and Massari (2022).

⁴ For references to the main studies of these various approaches, see Hobbs and Antonopolous (2014).

When researching organized crime, fieldwork is quite prohibitive, as is self-evident insofar as approaching directly mafia actors and their organizations is highly dangerous (Hosford et al., 2021). In the history of organized crime studies, there have been significant ethnographic works, which, however, showed that a complete immersion into the object of study is not completely feasible (Varese, 2022). By employing canonical ethnography, meaning “carrying out a project that is independent of authorities, developing an intimate knowledge of the place, the observation of interactions, the concern for the validity and the reliability of the data collected, including the position of the ethnographer, and the substantive effort at uncovering a hidden order” (Varese, 2022, p. 356), ethnographers are capable of learning more about the local communities on which organized crime has an impact rather than the criminal organizations themselves, which by definition are impenetrable. In other words, ethnographic studies might be conducted only in the external community, although it might imply significant risks.

While pure ethnography of criminal organizations - namely *inside* criminal organizations - is not achievable in practical terms, it is relevant to note that some sources contained in judicial files, like taped conversations, allow researchers to engage in a sort of ethnographic analysis. Conversations carried out by organized crime members open up a window on different situations experienced by mafia actors. The technology of recording conversations used by police agents offer researchers the opportunity to directly observe the interrelation among actors. Interestingly, since the actors are not aware that they will be listened to, the scene observed through reading the transcription of taped conversations can be considered as an authentic *natural setting*. Obviously, in this case, conversations should be analyzed with caution and above all contextualized by taking into consideration the background, roles and aims of the speaking actors. Another method to study the Mafia internally, researchers can turn to interviewing members of criminal organizations, even though they may not be easily approachable, or ex-members who collaborated with the justice system. By interacting with these subjects, researchers gain the possibility to make a fruitful observation of the phenomenon, although indirect. In other words, the interviewees' words can be used as a *telescope* to observe a social reality that, by definition, is distant from the researcher. Not surprisingly, interviews have been amply used in the field of organized crime despite the difficulties they pose in terms of access (von Lampe, 2008).

Grounded on my research activities on two mafia associations originally from Southern Italy - Cosa Nostra, from Sicily, and the 'Ndrangheta, from Calabria - this chapter illustrates some reflections on collecting and analyzing interviews with collaborators with justice, known in Italian as *pentiti* (literally meaning “repentant”). It is to note that in Italy there exists a law that protects people who collaborate with the State (law N. 1991, reformed in 2001). The state witness programme is managed by Commissione ex-art.10 and the Servizio Centrale di Protezione. The first body (made up of politicians, judges and policemen) is in charge of deciding the admission to the witness programme, as requested by public prosecutors. The programme includes protection measures, which consist in moving collaborators with justice to another place of residence, providing them with false documents, and, in some

circumstances, a change of identity, i.e., the creation of new personal data. Moreover, the programme includes economic assistance measures, which vary according to the numbers of relatives considered to be in danger, and prison benefits, which often result in alternative measures to prison, including house arrest.

2 Technique Employed

In most of my research project on mafias, I have used fruitfully interviews with people who turned state's evidence, a setting that shows the advantage of being epistemically rewarding without posing serious safety risks (indeed, collaborators with justice are protected by the state and the interview is organized by law enforcement agencies). During my fieldwork, I interviewed ten collaborators with justice.⁵ These interviews were particularly valuable, since they contributed to integrating the main sources traditionally used for studying mafia-type organized crime, i.e., judicial files, which while indispensable have many limits. On the one hand, judicial files provide us with crucial information about the actors populating criminal organizations and about their relationship with the context in which they operate. On the other hand, they still have difficulty highlighting those aspects of the phenomenon that go beyond its mere criminal dimension. The great merit of oral sources when studying the mafia is to offer internal perspectives, catching relational dynamics and subtle aspects related to the private experiences, lives and mentality of mafia members and their family, and social and cultural context. Despite these great advantages, interviews with collaborators with justice have been neglected, apart from some exceptions (Arlacchi, 1992, 1994; Dino, 2011, 2014; Gruppo, 2005; Ingrascì, 2013, 2021). Their testimonies have been collected more by journalists rather than scholars.

In the social sciences, scholars have amply demonstrated that collecting the voices of the actors involved in the phenomenon under scrutiny brings great rewards to researchers, especially as regards the thematic areas on which written sources are lacking, because they are hidden or traditionally neglected by mainstream studies and for these reasons invisible. Historian Thompson (2000, p. 154) has convincingly shown to what extent analysis on family, deviance, underground movements and minorities have benefited from oral sources. There is no doubt that the study of mafias can also gain many advantages from this kind of source, because mafias tend to be oral societies and are unlikely to leave written traces. Apart from few examples of written evidence, discovered by the police, such as the formula for the oath in the affiliation rite, the *libro mastro* of extortion (account book), or the so-called “*pizzini*”, the small notes that made up the communication system of mafia bosses, strategy and tradition are communicated and transmitted orally. Moreover, the

⁵ More precisely, I started to use this kind of oral sources in 1998 for my laurea thesis and I have kept using them until 2013 for a project on lawyers involved in mafia-related crimes.

mafias are not “simple” organized crime associations, in that they are underpinned by a cultural apparatus, that is more likely to be grasped through direct accounts provided by social actors rather than trial documents that describe prevalently behaviours and roles that are criminally liable. Oral sources can contribute to obtaining information about a given topic and at the same time grasping the perception of the respondent, namely the meaning that he/she attributes to the events and experiences of his/her life (Bertaux, 1981; Bourdieu, 1999; Thompson, 2000). As some studies have interestingly proposed, even one life story can be emblematic and fruitful for exploring social structures (Bertaux, 2010).

The peculiarities that need to be addressed when collecting and analysing interviews with collaborators with justice present many difficulties – not only logistical but also relational – and therefore require us to make some adaptations of traditional interview techniques in all stages. Generally speaking, the procedure that generates an oral narrative can be divided in two phases, including collection and analysis. It is not possible here to enter into a detailed description of all the sub-phases. I just refer to some elements of the interview’s procedure that are particularly problematic in interviews with collaborators with justice. They have to do with sampling, interview settings and interviewing processes.

2.1 Sampling

One of the first relevant factors to deal with, when using interviews, is sampling, i.e., who and how many participants should be interviewed. These questions have been amply debated in the literature on qualitative methods based on interviews (Beitin, 2012; Coyne, 1997). It is well known that in qualitative studies, unlike quantitative one, it is not desirable to adopt a probability sampling and better to develop a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) focussing “on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2014, p. 401). In other words, the effort should be directed to selecting “those persons, places, situations that will provide the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 p. 181). That is why people to be interviewed should be chosen “because of their perceived ability to answer specific questions of substantial or theoretical importance to the research” (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 105).

When planning to collect interviews with mafia *pentiti*, sampling is particularly complex, because their population is scarce and this might prevent researchers from finding the persons with the above required characteristics. In order to identify the “right” collaborators with justice to be interviewed, researchers can conduct media reviews and interviews with key informers, like public prosecutors, Law Enforcement agents and lawyers. Such interviews thus became crucial at the beginning of the sampling process. Once researchers identified the subjects they would like to interview, they need to consider that the possibility to interview them depends not only on the informer’s availability, but also the State’s authorization, because they live under

their protection. It is thus required to request the authorization to the *Commissione Centrale ex art. 10*. According to my research experience, obtaining the permission to conduct the interview may take a considerable amount of time, from three months to one year. These factors therefore reduce the possibility of choice for researchers. Indeed, it is not often feasible to interview a consistent number of *pentiti* for the same research project. As shown by research projects that have relied on these kinds of sources, the number of collaborators of justice who were interviewed, ranged from 20 (Gruppo, 2005) to one (Ingrascì, 2013, 2021; Dino, 2014).

Nevertheless, even one interview may represent a significant source of knowledge, if it is able to show “practices in situations” (Bertaux, 1999). Therefore, more than in other research contexts, researchers should make a great effort in looking for *pentiti*, who, for their experience and positions in the mafia, might offer an insightful perspective relevant to the topic of the research project. When I was working on my master’s thesis on mafia women, in 1998, there was only one woman who turned state’s evidence. Therefore, I had no choice but to interview one collaborator with justice, who fortunately was willing to participate. To enrich my perspective, I decided to interview some male *pentiti* as well, whose narrations could allow me to reach my project’s goals. In this context, I interviewed a ’Ndrangheta member who belonged to a clan that did business with a ’Ndrangheta family whose women were particularly active, and a Mafia member who was involved in Cosa Nostra, because his wife was the daughter of an important mafia boss. For another project, exploring lawyers involved in mafia activities, I interviewed the only lawyer charged with mafia association who decided to collaborate with the State. Even if only one subject was available, the interview was an epistemically valuable tool, as far as the interviewee’s perspective was particularly valuable being lawyers of many members of a powerful and leading family of Cosa Nostra (Ingrascì, 2020). Another good unity of illustration is the life-story interview with ex-boss and supergrass Emilio Di Giovine (Ingrascì, 2013). He was the son of Maria Serraino, a woman who belonged to an important ’Ndrangheta family from Calabria, who led with Emilio an international criminal organization in the 1980s and early 1990s. His life experiences threw light on many important issues related to the ’Ndrangheta, including the colonization of new territories by the Calabria criminal organization, ’Ndrangheta methods in raising children, the corruption of law enforcement agencies and the role of women in the organization.

2.2 Interview Settings

The setting of the interview, i.e., the place and environment in which the interview unfolds is crucial, because it has an impact on the feelings, emotions and perceptions of the interviewer and the informer and, consequently, the interview’s outcome. The literature underlines the importance of creating a comfortable environment to favour the free flow of memory (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In the case of the interview with *pentiti*, creating such an environment is very challenging.

Unlike researchers who make contact with informers who have freedom of movement, mafia researchers cannot organize interviews with their informers themselves. All logistic aspects are organized and managed by the police unit in charge of the protection system for collaborators with justice (*Servizio centrale di protezione*), which decides the place and the date of the meeting. According to my research experience, a precise procedure protocol is not envisaged. The interviews usually occur in places run by law enforcement agencies, like police stations or Procurement offices. Moreover, police officers might ask to be present during the interview and this is an aspect that has to be handled carefully by researchers both during the interview, in order to make the informer ignore the police's presence, and during the analysis in order to take into consideration that the collaborator with justice's testimony has been given in front of the police, which might have produced bias.

A single strategy to correct these problems does not exist. Researchers should find their own method to face these challenges. However, I would suggest that, as far as the researcher is able to develop a trusting and respectful relationship with the informer, he/she will be able to construct an alternative setting, that I would define as "symbolic", which should end up being more important than the real context in which the interview takes place. We will return to this point later.

Moreover, it is important to add that in the case of *pentiti*, unlike other interviewees, usually it is complicated to meet them again for other interviews, because a new authorization is necessary – a bureaucratic procedure that, as already mentioned, takes time. That is why the duration of the interviews mentioned above was quite long (from four to eight hours). In the case I reckoned that it would have been crucial to organize another meeting with the interviewee, I submitted another request of permission. This was the case with *pentito* Emilio Di Giovine: since his story of life was particularly rich and interesting, I decided to ask for new permissions in order to meet him more times. Indeed, the project lasted around three years (from 2008 to 2011).

2.3 Interviewing Processes

There are many techniques and styles of conducting and analysing interviews (Gubrium et al., 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The most suitable technique in collecting mafia *pentiti* testimony is the procedure suggested by the life-story approach (Atkinson, 1998). Even if the intention of interviewing *pentiti* is not to reconstruct the interviewee's life history, retracing it is inevitable, because their lives have been marked by a specific traumatic turning point, that is the decision to collaborate with justice. Whether it is formal or authentic, the repentance process represents a sort of *re-birth*. For this reason, the category in which inevitably the interview with *pentiti* falls is the *life story interview* (Atkinson, 1998) – which is an open and in-depth interview tracing the life history of the narrator – even if the intention of the researcher is to explore, through the experience of the interviewed collaborator with justice, a specific topic or dimension of organized crime. In my

interviewing experience, I found it useful to record the conversation, and at the same time take notes about the voice tone and the gesture of the interviewee.

The technique envisaged in life history interviews should be adapted when interviewing collaborators with justice as a consequence of their peculiar status. Indeed, the starting point usually adopted in a narrative approach, "Please tell me your life history", is not particularly suited to interviews with this category of people, as they have two lives, one before their choice of collaborating with justice and another after the collaboration. The first question that might facilitate the beginning of the encounter and allow the two parts to move easily through past and present events and the narrator's perceptions concerns the reasons and circumstances of the choice to collaborate with justice, which can range from utilitarian motivations – i.e., getting a reduction of punishment – to authentic repentance. This start usually offers the interview process a productive articulation. Another significant aspect that needs to be addressed is the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, which occupies a central point in the debate over the interview's methodology, especially in relation to the advantages and drawbacks of the dominant role of subjectivity.

The interview is an artificial construction of a document for research purposes that benefits both contributors, the interviewee/informer that is the person who offers what he/she knows and his/her perspective and perceptions, and the interviewer/researcher who is the person listening to the story and interprets and makes the narrative output known through a written text. In essence, the interview is the results of two subjectivities that produce a document useful for knowledge that before the encounter did not exist. That is why it is a unique product that is influenced by several variables. In my experience, a significant variable was gender. Being a female researcher had a different impact according to the gender of interviewees. When I interviewed ex-mafia women, I established a special rapport (Gluck & Patai, 1991) that was quite different compared to the relationship I developed with male collaborators, who had a sort of "chivalrous attitude". Indeed, they tended to treat me showing complaisance and zeal towards me. For example, Emilio Di Giovine at the beginning of our encounter asked me what my zodiac sign was and started to praise my supposed personality associated with this sign and in line with traditional gender social expectations (i.e., sweetness and weakness). This resulted in avoiding – at the initial phase of interview – to speak about violent facts because of my sex.

This kind of situation recurred even with other male pentiti. After the initial phase, I was able to invite them to overcome this male attitude, in order to make them free of talking even with a woman about brutal acts. To achieve this, I tried to assume, as much as possible, a sort of gender-neutral posture. However, whether the interviewee was male or female, to obtain significant results the interaction of the two actors – interviewer and interviewee – should encompass trust, honesty, reciprocal concern, and confidentiality, and it should be as equal as possible and not judgemental, as suggested by feminist methodology (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992;

Burns & Walker, 2005; Merrill, 2021)⁶ In interviews with collaborators with justice, who have been trained since their childhood to be suspicious, creating a trusting environment is particularly arduous, yet highly recommended.

3 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

“Life story research always means you are playing with another person’s life” (Plummer, 2001, p. 224). Scholars working with human documents have produced many reflections upon the impact that the interview might generate on the interviewee and also on the researcher. They have outlined that, paradoxically, interviews might have therapeutic and at the same time traumatic effects for the interviewee and that researchers can experience difficult emotions when interviewing people that talk about their suffering and shocking life experiences (Jones, 1988; Rickards, 1998; Rosenthal, 1991). On the one hand, it is important to remember that researchers are not therapists and their act of listening does not have clinic purposes, only involving research. On the other hand, it is fundamental for researchers to be aware of the effects that the encounter and talking can have on their informers and also on themselves. These aspects raise important ethical issues.

The twofold effect – traumatic and therapeutic at the same time – can be particularly accentuated in the case of collaborators with justice. The decision of turning state witness brings about a profound change (whether formal or informal) in identity that is by definition a turning point. Mafia *pentiti* show many emotional contradictions at a deep level as the results of their two clashing identities. Accepting their new identity is not a smooth process. This is quite understandable, considering that in the view of the mafia, a collaborator with justice is not merely considered a betrayer, but somebody who broke one of the most important rules of the organisation, that is *omertà* (the law of silence). As this quality is considered an attribute of virility, talking with the enemy, namely the state, causes the man to lose an important feature of *mafioso* identity, which he would have kept in prison or on the run. Collaborators with justice told me that they considered *pentiti* as *infami* (contemptible people) when they were in the underworld. A *pentito*, who previously belonged to Cosa Nostra, told me that some *mafiosi* (his ex-fellows) he had accused, insulted him during a hearing in Turin. He admitted to me that he understood their point of view:

Of course, in Turin they were all in that cage and they called me a bastard I don’t know how many times, then “*infamune*” (“infamous, wicked, evil, etc.”) but to be honest I say to myself, “Well, they are right to call me that... because I said the same to them when I saw Cancemi, “Look at this piece of shit.”⁷

⁶I follow the position according to which a feminist approach can be applied even when dealing with male interviewees (for a useful discussion on this thorny question, see Campbell, 2003).

⁷Interview with V. L. P., Bologna, 2 April 2004.

Eventually becoming a *pentito* is not an easy decision, even if compelled by circumstances. He confessed: “It was easier to be a *mafioso* than a *pentito*”. Turning state’s evidence means abandoning one’s own traditional identity and taking up an unknown one.

Researchers interviewing *pentiti* should consider these deep and intimate aspects of the *pentimento* - repenting - process. On the one hand, remembering their past might be emotionally painful, since they are compelled to go back to their previous identity, for which they might feel contrasting emotions: between nostalgia and contempt. When the interviewee shows upsetting feelings in talking about an experience, and the researcher is interested in the story because it is particularly relevant to his/her research project, the researcher should be sensitive and wait for the right moment to ask him/her to elaborate the story, even at the risk of not discussing that topic anymore. Avoiding re-traumatization and leaving a positive impression of the interview to the informer are more important than reaching the goals of the interview in terms of knowledge.

On the other hand, *pentiti* are subjects who appear quite strong especially when showing off their capacity of remembering that has been certificated by their trial experience. In this regard they feel powerful and are keen on demonstrating this capacity during the interview. This attitude might become an obstacle, reducing the possibility to introduce topics that are not included in what can be called their “judiciary memory”, a sort of preset memory, like a script, that they have developed after being questioned dozens of times by judges and lawyers (Ingrascì, 2013). During the interview process, researchers should be able to go beyond such memory that *pentiti* tend to use at the beginning of the encounter. The ability to overcome it depends on the types of questions that the researcher poses and the modality of addressing them. The aim should be separating the informer’s tale from the myth stemming from their construction of their past mafia identity, and the current identity as *pentiti*.

The researcher’s preparation is useful in order not only to design the interview and to establish mutual respect and trust, but also to conduct it (Thompson, 2000, p. 224). It permits them to interrupt the prefixed way in which the informer’s memory works and his/her tendency to depict his/her past with emphasis and exaggeration, or on the contrary downplay it. For this purpose, it is better to take up the proper method of oral historians who “go into the interview armed with documents, (...), citations from other sources, and other memory aids” (Thompson, 2000, p. 250). At the same time, this preparation should not impede the development of the free-flowing dialogue and the unbiased process of listening, since as I mentioned above, the procedure should tend to follow the method of in-depth interviews.⁸

While interviewing male *pentiti* on the issue of mafia women, I was able to challenge their desire to show that they respect women and to mask their male chauvinism. After listening for a while about their perspective and what they want to tell a

⁸ For a review of the literature on in-depth interviews, see Johnson and Rowlands (2012); for a clear and synthetic explanation of this method, see Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Denzin (1989).

female researcher, I surprised them by asking questions on topics they have never considered and asking for empirical and vivid examples. Therefore, moving from general questions to specific ones after having developed a trusting relationship pushed them to start to give me a more realistic picture of gender relationships in mafia families, including violent events. At that point, for the sake of my research, as it was crucial for them to keep giving me reliable information based on their experience and practices, I did not show my disturbed feelings and I did not interrupt them.

This interviewing practice, that I have just briefly illustrated, is an example of strategy that I employed in order to disarticulate the judiciary memory of the collaborator with justice I met. The strategy has taken advantage of Thompson's advice when warning us that: "General questions... will encourage subjective and collective myths and impressions; while detailed questions can draw out the particular facts and accounts of everyday life which the social historian may be seeking. But this does not mean that the myths and impressions lack any validity [...] historians too easily forget that most people are less interested in calendar years than themselves, and do not arrange their memories with dates as markers" (Thompson, 2000, p. 157).

To ethically approach the interview, it is quite important to stimulate the subject to talk about the positive aspects entailed by his/her present life, since this may help him/her to reinforce her/his new identity and favour his/her own sense of self.⁹ Any topic the researcher discusses with the *pentito*, it is important to link it to his/her life after the *pentimento*. This procedure should contribute to avoiding traumatic effects.

The interview interaction has an impact also on the researcher/listener. The tales told by mafia *pentiti* often can bring about conflicting feelings. Listening to the account of a series of murders by a 'Ndrangheta *pentito*, whose career profited from his ability to kill or commit violent acts against women without showing remorse, aroused a horrible reaction within myself. However, I did not react visibly and I was able to keep silent, not only willfully for the sake of the interview but also spontaneously because I perceived the interview setting as a *world apart* that stimulated me to adopt a neutral attitude that shows respect towards the person who was offering his/her life story. Significantly, I had more difficulty coping with this tale about violent acts when I left the setting, and hence the world apart, and reconsidered the encounter, took field notes, and listened again to his words for the tape transcription.

My experience was quite similar to Kathleen Blee's one concerning her encounter with activist women in the Ku-Klux-Klan. I felt very close to her perspective when she wrote (Blee, 1991, p. 6): "I was prepared to hate and fear my informants. My own commitment to progressive politics prepared me to find these people strange, even repellent... What I found was more disturbing. Many of the people I interviewed were interesting, intelligent, and well informed... Many were sympathetic persons". Interestingly, Thompson (2000, p. 256) commented: "It was this

⁹For this effect produced by the interview, see Thompson (2000 p. 183).

surprising normality which became the basis for her new interpretation of the movement". Researchers can be surprised by the various unexpected emotions and reactions that the encounter with his/her informant may generate. Scholars should thereby be ready to accept their feelings and reflect on them in order to make them productive in terms of understanding the participants and the phenomenon under investigation.

Finally, when reporting the results in a written text, some important ethical recommendations should be remembered. They range from the honesty of reporting rightly the events of another person's life and describing them without producing any harm in terms of reputation and social relations, to avoiding exploiting him/her by sharing the royalties of intellectual property rights with him/her, preserving his/her privacy and guaranteeing his/her safety.¹⁰

The last points are particularly important when meeting *pentiti* and reporting their stories, given their peculiarity as subjects that live under the state's protection. Researchers must not talk with anybody about where the meeting took place, which is usually only communicated orally by the police, nor about the content of the interview. Being able to respect privacy is one of the most important qualities requested from researchers working with *pentiti*'s direct testimonies. At the beginning of the interview, it is necessary to ask informers to sign the informed consent, which provides him/her with information about the purpose of the research project and the envisaged security procedures.¹¹ The informed consent should be validated by the University's Ethics Committee.

4 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

Discussing methods is particularly crucial in the study of organized crime, because in this field of research, the gap between the general procedures suggested in handbooks offering qualitative methods and actual research practices is particularly wide. This gap might disorient researchers, since they find themselves with no specific research toolkit, because the one traditionally used in the social sciences might not be sufficient or suitable to investigate the terrain of organized crime. At the same time, this gap, despite the frustration that might ensue, is a space of freedom that can stimulate researchers to expand their own sociological imagination (Mills, 1956) and creativity. This makes it quite ambivalent and risky. On the one hand, it might

¹⁰For a complete outline of several ethical questions when collecting life stories, see Plummer (2001). Particularly interesting are his considerations about the reactions of research participants when reading the text reporting the results of the interview in a written text. He mentions the work of Caroline Brettell's collection, *When They Read What We Write* (Plummer, 2001 pp. 216–223). See also part IV "Ethics of Interview" in Gubrium et al. (2012).

¹¹For security and privacy reasons, I named interviewees with pseudonyms, with one exception (the case of Emilio Di Giovine, who agreed on using his real name).

inspire innovative methodological paths, on the other, evaluating the method's quality might be more complex for the academic community.

Therefore, it is interesting to explore the implications of this gap by asking ourselves how it would be possible to make this space rewarding without neglecting rigorous procedures and overcoming the pitfalls that this field of research produces by definition. The solution is not to call for standardized methods in this research area, but rather to accentuate as much as possible transparency and reflexivity, by sharing the principles that have informed the practices of research. This chapter attempts to give a contribution in this direction by putting forward a sort of "*methodological self-consciousness*" (Finlay, 2012, p. 319).

When producing and analyzing interviews with people who have turned state's evidence, coming up against a gap between "canonic" procedures and practices of research is particularly likely. However, the challenges posed by these kinds of interviews offer researchers a great opportunity to learn, especially in relation to two aspects of the interviews: the relation with research participants and the hermeneutic process at stake during the entire interview process. I will discuss these two aspects, as resulting from my personal research experience.

As regards the first one, as the interviewing literature reminds us, interviewees should be treated as subjects and not objects. This ethical attitude is not only responsible, but also strategic, because the results of the interview will benefit from it. There is no doubt that *authentically* respecting the person who tells his/her story, whatever is his/her past and whatever feelings this relationship might produce, is fundamental. Pierre Bourdieu wrote the following, highly instructive, words:

I would say that the interview can be considered as a sort of *spiritual exercise* that, through *forgetfulness of the self*, aims at a true *conversation of the way we look* at other people in the ordinary circumstances of life. The welcoming disposition, which leads one to make the respondent's problems one's own, the capacity to take that person and understand them just as they are in their distinctive necessity, is a sort of *intellectual love*: a gaze that consents to necessity in the manner of the "intellectual love of God", that is, of the natural order, which Spinoza held to be the supreme form of knowledge (1999, p. 614).

Despite all our efforts to build a "proper" relationship, there always exists a distance between the narrator and the listener.¹² In the case of interviews with ex-mafia members who collaborated with justice, this distance is particularly considerable in terms of experience and background, since the *pentiti* were ex-criminals, who used to carry out criminal activities, sometimes including murders and they were educated since their infancy according to mafia conduct and beliefs. A good unity of illustration in this sense is a piece of the interview that a woman, who used to be part of a 'Ndrangheta family, gave me. She explained to me what it means to be born in an environment in which adults have taught you that illegality is *normal* ever since you were a child:

¹²In this regard, it is worthwhile recalling Bourdieu's profound considerations in the last chapter of *The Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, where he addresses the complexity and pitfalls of the "interview relationship" (1999, see in particular pp. 607–617).

When somebody is in a family such as mine, no one can stop you. You can understand that it is wrong, and disagree with everything. However, you are there, you have to do it and that's it. I do not have the chance to say "I am going far away from here;" I did not have an escape route, I have no money, I was always dependent on my mum.

This reflection brought her to justify her criminal deeds, insomuch as she did not feel guilty: "...if you think carefully, I do not have any guilt to expiate, I did not do anything *abnormal*, unfortunately living in that family I was doing a job". From the point of view of her regular life, her criminal behaviour was simple routine. When I asked her for an explanation regarding details of drug trafficking or other illegal businesses, whose meaning she took for granted, she apologized for the fact that she forgot that I was *not normal*: "Sorry Ombretta, I talk to you as if I were talking with a *normal* person. This happens even with the lawyers; many times, we do things therefore it is very easy for us to talk about them" (Ingrascì, 2021). This difficulty of comprehension also characterizes the *pentiti*'s relationships with magistrates and lawyers, as they would be foreigners speaking different languages (Falcone & Padovani, 1993).

In order to find a common terrain, it is important, as I underlined above, to develop reciprocity and trust, elements that are unanimously recognized as fundamental for the success of an interview (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Gubrium, 2012). However, creating a trustful relationship is particularly challenging when meeting mafia *pentiti*, since the education they received in mafia families and their past experience in the criminal arena has made them distrustful (Ingrascì, 2021). The fact that they have accepted to be interviewed means that they are willing to talk, not that they will show trust, which is a feeling that must be conquered during the encounter.

The second aspect on which interviewing collaborators with justice offers a great opportunity to learn concerns interpretations, which regard both the interview as a source of information and as a communicative performative act, thus as a source of discourse data (see Nikander, 2012). Interpretation occurs continuously during the various phases of the interview: in the first one, which is oral and dynamic, it happens during the interactive interview process; in the second one, which is both oral and written, it occurs during the transcription and writing action; in the third phase, which is written and static, it occurs during the reading of the research results. These actions are carried out by three different actors, including the narrator, the listener/writer, and the reader.

The interpretational act during the second phase depends on how researchers have conducted the first phase, according to the orientation of their research project. When the research is oriented much towards "objectivity" and, thus, the researcher is looking for reliable information, oral evidence should be validated, like written evidence, by "searching for internal consistency, cross-checking details from other sources, weighing evidence against a wider context" (Thompson, 2000, p. 153). In other words, it is necessary to employ a triangulation strategy. Collaborators with justice's accounts are particularly reliable, since they have been corroborated by other court elements, and used in the trial by prosecutors. Investigative and court

documents offer fundamental support and allow researchers to filter and confront the words of informers.

There is no doubt that even if our research is oriented more towards “objectivity”, the analysis should not neglect the personal perceptions and impressions that informers offer during the interview, since subjectivity plays an important role in sociohistorical structures and social processes (Bourdieu, 1999; Bertaux, 2010; Thompson, 2000). However, when the research is oriented more towards the aim of excavating subjectivity, our attention during the interview setting and our analysis should be focussed not only on the content, but especially on the communication process and the performative act. In the case of mafia *pentiti*, it is important to remember that the process of talking is the opposite of *omertà*. Needless to say, silence is a key aspect to be considered and analyzed when talking with mafia *pentiti* and interpreting the interviews given by them. Moreover, in interpreting conversations, it is particularly important to take into consideration not only what they say or do not say, but also their ways of speaking and gestures. Although the interviewees might draw the latter elements from media representations and thus provide a caricature of *mafiosi* (Gambetta, 1993), it is still necessary to take notes on them. Importantly, observing these aspects has nothing to do with the intention of giving *mafiosi* a mythical image that might contribute to accentuating the already stereotypical picture of them. However, from what my experience has suggested, not only having good knowledge of the mafia structure and mentality, but also understanding mafia nuances in their body language and facial expression is central to conducting a “successful” interview with an ex-*mafioso*.

Finally, researchers should be aware that the narration fixed in a written text can be interpreted by readers in different ways, meaning that “the story has been liberated from its origin and can enter into new interpretive frames, where it might assume meanings not intended by the persons involved in the original event” (Torill, 2006, p. 300). For this reason, researchers should treat with caution the life story of *pentiti* and propose an analysis that will not bring about a celebration of their past. On the contrary, providing a realistic picture of *pentiti* might help overcome stereotypical representations of mafia life.

To conclude this chapter, the area of research on organized crime needs more reflection on methodological issues, since they have been traditionally neglected. In order to advance the *discourse on methods* in the field of organized crime, it is advisable to increase opportunities for sharing research practices among organized crime scholars, giving particular attention to two aspects, ethics and interdisciplinarity. This sharing, along with the interconnected process of transmission – which takes place in contexts like workshops, postgraduate courses, PhD programmes, antimafia associations’ training, etc. – is fundamental in a field in which there is a great distance between the theory and practice in doing research. Discussing research experiences, both in relation to challenges and above all regarding the practical strategies devised to face them, is vital and pivotal in building new fruitful and solid paths for investigating invisible and porous phenomena such as organized crime.

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Chapter 20

How to Investigate a Criminal Psychopath?



Lucía Halty 

1 Definition of the Phenomenon or Population

Psychopathy is one of the most destructive psychiatric disorders found in any society, not only for the severity and violence of the behaviors it engenders but also because it requires the use of a broad range of services, from the prison and justice system to health and welfare services. Robert Hare, a leading international expert in the field, has described psychopaths as “intraspecies predators” who use charm, manipulation, intimidation, and violence to control others and to satisfy their selfish needs. Lacking in conscience and feelings toward others, they act in an extraordinarily cold-blooded way, violating social norms and expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or remorse (Hare, 2016). These individuals are also responsible for a large number of serious crimes and for much of the violence and physical, emotional, and social harm that occurs in any society. But perhaps the most alarming fact is that virtually everyone is affected at some point in their lives by the antisocial behavior of psychopaths, well represented as they are among recidivist criminals, sex offenders, drug dealers, fraudsters, mercenaries, corrupt politicians, crooked lawyers, loan sharks, unscrupulous traders, terrorists, and leaders of religious cults.

One of the most important functions expected of theories explaining psychopathology is a prediction of which individuals are more likely to exhibit highly disturbed behaviors. Incomprehension of the phenomenon of such serious acts of violence means that sometimes such people are simply relegated to the realm of evil – “they are bad, wicked.” People wonder how someone could repeatedly kill, rape, rob, or assault and if they were not due to evil forces. But although the crimes of such people are commonly considered to be “evil,” the individuals who commit them are undoubtedly human. Their “badness” lies in the premeditation with which

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they plan to harm others. In this sense, psychopaths are not “different” from others, but rather illustrate extreme aspects of being human.

When chilling accounts of the terrible acts that psychopaths can commit appear in the media, a shadow of fear and questioning of human nature arises and it may be asked how it is possible for one person to be capable of making another suffer in such a way. It is even less comprehensible when such behavior is found in children.¹ It appears impossible to believe that a child, with all the goodness associated with childhood, can be so cruel, insensitive, dishonest, manipulative, and incapable of guilt or remorse. The idea that a child can have psychopathic tendencies divides the academic community. Some authors consider a child’s brain to be still actively developing and that normal behavior for those ages can be misinterpreted as psychopathic (Steinberg, 2007). Others even fear that, while such a diagnosis might be made accurately, the social cost of labeling a child a psychopath is simply too high. And finally, a small but growing number of psychologists argue that confronting the problem as early as possible can represent an opportunity to help them change course (Haas et al., 2018).

In approaching this domain, it is first necessary to define psychopathy. Without going into the possible differences with other terms such as sociopath or antisocial personality disorder (Mokros et al., 2015), psychopathy is defined as a personality disorder comprising two fundamental factors: i) personality traits such as cruelty, lack of empathy, lack of remorse, and inability to form lasting bonds; and ii) antisocial behavior, impulsivity, and criminal versatility (Hare & Neumann, 2010). When referring to psychopathy in childhood, the callous-unemotional (CU) concept is most often used (Frick et al., 2014). The CU trait is understood as a lack of empathy, a lack of guilt or remorse, and insensitivity to others’ feelings (Frick & Ray, 2014). It has been shown in both clinical and community samples of children that the presence of the CU trait consistently emerges as distinct from other aspects of psychopathy such as impulsivity and narcissism (Frick et al., 2000). Impulsivity does not differentiate or distinguish subgroups within children who have severe early onset behavioral problems, or delinquent adolescents with major behavioral issues, whereas high levels of the CU trait are characteristic of a group of antisocial youth who display features associated with adult psychopathy (Essau et al., 2006). Children who have behavioral problems and also present with the CU trait show patterns of behavior that are more severe and stable over time (Lopez-Romero et al., 2017). Moreover, compared with children who just show behavioral problems, children with the CU trait minimize the consequences that their aggression has for their victims, are not intimidated by the possibility of being punished for their bad behavior (Pardini & Byrd, 2012), show less empathy for the feeling of sadness (de Wied et al., 2012) and are more likely to start substance abuse at an early age (Wymbs et al., 2012). Results similar to those found in boys have shown that girls presenting with the CU trait together with behavioral problems have more severe and persistent

¹In my research, I use the term “child” to refer to those under 14 years, adolescent for those above 14 years of age, and I use the term “minors” to refer to both groups.

patterns of antisocial conduct than girls who exhibit only behavioral disorders (Pardini et al., 2012).

2 Phases of Fieldwork

One of the many factors making the study of psychopathy complex is that psychopaths are a difficult-to-reach population. It should be borne in mind that it is a disorder characterized, among other things, by a superficial charm and a considerable capacity for manipulation, and so profiles can be very deceptive and difficult to evaluate (Kyranides et al., 2017). In the past, given that it is a disorder related to criminality, early research was undertaken in prisons (Hare, 1996). Adult criminal psychopaths, therefore, became the first group of subjects with psychopathy to be studied and the research results have consistently reflected the inability of such people to feel emotions such as fear or anxiety (Patrick & Drislane, 2014) or to feel empathy and recognize the emotions of others (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005a), which often entails an absence of natural restraints on performing antisocial acts or hurting others.

The next step in the comprehension of the phenomenon of psychopathy was to study younger subjects in order to ascertain whether young people had the same characteristics as the adult population and whether it was possible to achieve a change in course. Access strategy to young people with psychopathic characteristics is based on their age group and whether or not they have been involved in any criminal activity. These criteria generate several categories.

2.1 *Convict Adolescents*

The first category is adolescents with a record of criminal activity. Depending on the age criteria of each country's laws, it is possible to find young people who have committed crimes and are serving a custodial sentence. To study psychopathy in this age group, one of the most widely used assessment tools is the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV) (Brazil & Forth, 2016). The PCL:YV is a semi-structured interview consisting of 20 items scored on a 0–2-point scale (0 = item does not apply to the subject; 1 = item sometimes applies to the subject; 2 = item definitely applies to the subject). The information gathered in the interview should be contrasted with the reports that may exist on the minor in the penitentiary center where he/she is being held. Its use was originally recommended for adolescents of 13 and upwards, although it appears that the PCL:YV has a higher predictive validity for ages from 12 to 15 (Stockdale et al., 2010).

The difficulties involved in studying this group of young people can be reduced to two elements: access to the penal institution and the interview. As minors deprived of their liberty, they are specially protected by the State, which is why it is an

essential requirement for the researcher to request the relevant access permits, presenting the research project and informed consent. It is advisable to take this step as early as possible since the administrative processes are slow and can significantly delay the course of the research. The second aspect entailing a certain amount of difficulty is the interview itself. In studies designed to gather data by means of self-reporting, it is not so necessary for the researcher to have expertise or knowledge of the object of study; but in cases where data is gathered via interviews, it is essential for the researcher to be highly trained in interview technique, and even more so if the profile of the person to be interviewed might include psychopathic tendencies.

As stated above, individuals with such profiles are expert manipulators who rapidly detect any insecurity on the part of the interviewer and use it to manage the information they choose to give (Masip, 2017). It requires the researcher to prepare well for the interview as they must guard against letting themselves be affected by the gravity of the crime, or the superficial charm and/or seduction encountered in some of these profiles. Especially if the researcher is a woman, she must be prepared for the game of seduction the interviewee may enter into, and she must have a response prepared for such situations. I have personally experienced this situation several times in over 15 years of professional experience, interviewing people both younger and older than myself. Early in my professional career, I interviewed a 17-year-old minor who was serving a sentence for sexual assault. It was my first interview with a sex offender. Midway through the interview, and unrelated to the conversation we were having at the time, the subject asked whether I had any plans when I finished the interview and left the prison. He was in solitary confinement and clearly was not in a position to get out of prison; however, instead of answering by saying that such questions were not relevant to the interview and that I was not going to answer them, I responded by saying that I had no particular plans, which caused him to take control of the interview from that point on and continue to ask personal questions.

When interviewing the inmate population, it is important to consider the dangerousness of the situation. Therefore, before entering the venue of the interview, it is important to ask those responsible for the penitentiary center if the inmate has ever displayed aggressive behavior either toward the staff of the center or toward external personnel. If so, it is important to ask why it happened and the circumstances in which it occurred, in case these are situations that can be avoided in the interview. Therefore, it is very important to know the security protocols, in case of a violent situation during the interview, where the interviewer can ask for help and to know whether there will be security personnel nearby. As an example, on one occasion, I interviewed a 55-year-old person, who was on day release after a sentence of more than 25 years. The interviewee arrived drunk, and as the interviewer, I failed to confidently reschedule the meeting for a later time. As a result, the interview did not go as planned. Almost at the beginning, faced with a question that made him uncomfortable (I asked him about his sentimental life just when his partner had just broken up with him), he struck the table very hard, stood up and intimidated me, saying that he would not answer any such question. The security protocols of that center had

been explained to me and I was prepared for that situation, and so was able to call the security personnel to take him away.

It is also important to be aware of the context in which the interview takes place; prisons are not warm or welcoming environments, so it is important for the interviewer to be familiar with the penal setting and to have received training from the prison on how to act there. One of the biggest difficulties in conducting this type of interview is finding a way to show empathy with an interviewee who is deficient in that trait, being able to get close to the person and not be overpowered by the impact of his or her deeds. All the effort required of the interviewer in every interview of this type takes a very heavy emotional toll, making it advisable, first, not to conduct many consecutive interviews of this type. My experience has shown me that I cannot conduct more than three interviews in the same morning. On one occasion, to take advantage of the travel time to the prison and not have to return to conduct only one interview, I interviewed four inmates consecutively, the last of which was a very complicated case with a very manipulative profile. The result was that during the interview, I ended up giving him my personal information including my email address, name and surname and the university where I worked so that he could send me documentation about his court case. It seems literally unbelievable that a person with years of experience conducting interviews could give him that information. At that moment, tiredness prevented me from reacting correctly.

As can be seen in the example, the emotional cost of this type of interview is very high. Therefore, it is advisable to be able to talk and unburden oneself emotionally with a supervisor after each interaction. On many occasions, these types of interviews are emotionally demanding, either because the crime committed by the inmate involves victims (it is especially hard when they involve blood crimes or sexual assaults on children) or because the offender does not express any kind of remorse or guilt for what he has done. On a personal note, there have been many occasions when I left the prisons and returned home, where I would ask myself why I did not study why people were happy, instead of studying why there were people who hurt others.

2.2 Adolescents with no Criminal Record

The second category of participants researched is adolescents with no record of criminal activity. In seeking to assess young people who have not committed crimes and who are in community settings (e.g., schools), the PCL:YV assessment tool is not recommended, as it includes questions that are only applicable to subjects in the previous category, such as the assessment of criminal versatility, which cannot take place outside the penal environment. For such cases there are self-reporting measures, which can be answered by the adolescents themselves. Some of these assessment tests are the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD) (Frick et al., 2000), the Child Psychopathy Scale (CPS) (Lynam, 1998), the Youth Psychopathic Traits

Inventory (YPI) (Andershed et al., 2002), and the Psychopathy Content Scale (PCS) (Cornell et al., 1996).

2.3 *Child Population*

Thirdly, for cases involving an assessment of psychopathic characteristics in the child population, and where self-reporting is not valid because children are too young to understand the items and complete the questionnaire, one of the most widely used tools is the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU) (Frick et al., 2005). This tool, as well as others that are used with the child population, has a version for parents to complete and another for teachers. That makes it possible to obtain a more objective assessment of the presence of the CU trait in this population. Most of the time, this type of sample is drawn from the educational environment, such as school or high school.

The usual places to find both adolescents and children with no criminal activity are schools and therapeutic centers. Many children are taken to therapy by their parents for having exhibited serious behavioral problems and having been unmanageable both at home and at school. In order to gain access to schools, it is advisable to contact the school's manager, who must assess whether the research can be carried out. Sometimes, the researcher can also contact the psychology department, if the school has one (not all schools do).

When accessing schools, as we are only interested in a small group of children with a moderate to high level of behavioral problems, care needs to be taken not to unconsciously single out those who "behave badly." For this reason, it is sometimes better to study a broader group of children, including part of the control sample in the research, and not just to collect information about those with serious behavioral problems. With such an approach, the researcher avoids singling out problematic minors and stigmatizing or labeling them in front of their peers.

Once the three categories of study samples have been identified, the researcher is left with the difficult task of choosing which sample to investigate. There are arguments for and against all three categories. My research journey on criminal psychopathy began with the first category, adolescents who had committed crimes. I was very intellectually curious about the nature of this type of youth and the nature of psychopathy in their population. Before agreeing to my first interview, I read extensively about psychopathy in order to educate myself in depth before facing an adolescent with these characteristics.

Access to this type of sample is very complex. The first step is to contact the public entity that manages the different centers where these minors are serving their sentences. In most cases, a document must be submitted to this public body, explaining in detail the objectives and aims of the research. In my personal experience, a demonstration of my commitment to providing a personalized return of the results of my research in a short time (one or two weeks after seeing the adolescent) has greatly facilitated access. I give this feedback first to the adolescent being evaluated,

and if the adolescent gives his or her authorization, I also provide it to the professionals of the institution where he or she is being held. In my view, one of the mistakes that is often made in research is that we do not add the value of our work to that of the professionals who are working day by day with these minors, especially when the center's staff has spent considerable time arranging for us to conduct the research.

Once the research is approved, the relevant authorities put the researcher in contact with one or more detention centers to which access is authorized to start the research. The next step, before gaining access to the minor, is to obtain their informed consent to participate in the research. As minors' profiles and situations are very varied, my advice is to let the center manage the request for consent with the families and to keep these consents themselves, showing the researcher that they have been granted and who can be part of the study.

Once we have access to the center, the next step is to collect the data by interviewing the children or gathering other type of data that have been proposed in the research plan. It depends on the type of study being conducted, but it is usual to meet with the participant once or twice; once for the interview and once to administer a supplementary test. In those situations where the minor knows that the researcher will interact with them at least two or three times, it may seem that it would be more difficult for the child to provide the researcher with answers or even to be interested in talking to him/her. My personal experience has been that minors have almost always attended interviews with interest and a positive attitude. This has also been the experience of other fellow researchers. It must be kept in mind that life in a correctional facility is very monotonous and dull, so inmates are usually grateful for an outside visitor who comes to talk to them and shows interest in who they are. This does not prevent the juvenile from failing to tell the truth in the interview, but the attitude toward the researcher is usually positive and open.

3 Techniques Employed

When approaching the study and understanding of criminal psychopathy, one of the most frequently asked questions is: why are they like that? Turning to neuroscience sometimes helps to answer this question. The study of cognitive neuroscience contributes significantly to the understanding of many pathologies and allows a deeper level of analysis that can help identify the most suitable sort of intervention. In view of which, the aim of this section is to briefly explain how the study of young people with psychopathic features can be conducted from a neuroscience perspective. It first examines the theoretical explanations of the behavior of psychopaths, and then considers the techniques derived from this field that have been applied to them.

In the first place, it must be understood that one of the most specific dysfunctions present in psychopathy is emotional. Both adult and juvenile subjects with psychopathic features have problems recognizing and reacting to particular emotions, specifically fear (Espinoza et al., 2018). In the case of children with psychopathic

features who score highly for the CU trait, they have trouble when it comes to processing facial expressions of fear and sadness – i.e., much slower reaction times in recognizing those emotional expressions and, when they say they recognize them, they are less accurate than the control group subjects (Blair et al., 2001). These results were replicated in clinical samples of children with psychopathic tendencies (Leist & Dadds, 2009), in samples of adolescent girls (Fairchild et al., 2010), and in samples of psychopathic adults (Brislin et al., 2018). When vocal tones reflecting the different emotions were used, they also showed inability to recognize the tone of fear (Blair et al., 2005b). Dadds et al. (2008) also studied emotional recognition in juvenile samples covering ages 8 to 15. As with previous studies, those scoring high for CU traits made more errors in recognizing facial expressions of fear, but not of other emotions.

Having established that there is an emotional deficiency in subjects with psychopathy, the next step is to investigate where it is located. In order to do this, as indicated above, we turn to neuroscience. From an anatomical point of view, one of the structures that has been most closely related to emotional deficits in psychopaths is the amygdala (Fede et al., 2016), which is involved in the recognition of emotional expressions, including fear (Adolphs et al., 1995). The amygdala is a region of the brain that is essential to processing the emotional significance of events happening around it (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005). It gauges the emotional meaning of simple sensory features, complex perceptions and even abstract thoughts, while controlling the expression of emotional reactions. These functions are fulfilled through subcortical (thalamus-amygdala) or cortical (thalamus-cortex-amygdala) circuits (Meffert et al., 2018).

In my approach to the study of young people with psychopathy, I have always been interested in what their brains are like. To study the human brain, two of the most widespread techniques are the electroencephalogram (EEG, evoked potentials) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Regardless of the differences between the techniques, I have always worked with EEG because it requires a lower budget and because it is much easier to transport to the prison. Replicating a laboratory situation in a prison is not straightforward. When working in neuroscience, the ideal is to have a Faraday room (acoustically and electromagnetically isolated), and these conditions are not found in a prison. Even so, it is necessary to create an environment as free as possible from interference in order to carry out the brain recordings on the inmates. In order to conduct EEG research in prison, it is advisable, firstly, to go to the prison well in advance because all the equipment has to pass security controls and then the room in which the recordings are to be made has to be prepared. Secondly, the principal investigator should always be accompanied by a laboratory technician who has an excellent command of the EEG and is capable of solving any technical problems that may arise. Finally, it is advisable to have a relaxed conversation with the participant during the placement of all the electrodes on the head. The placement of the electrodes is a time-consuming task (minimum 30–40 min), so it is a good time to establish a relaxed conversation and build trust.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

Any research with human beings must be mindful of the ethical risks; for good reason, approval should be obtained from ethics committees as to research aims and methods. When working in medical research involving human subjects, the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki – its latest version is from 2013 – must be followed. The World Medical Association has promulgated the Declaration of Helsinki as a set of proposed ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. The field of psychology has to comply with these principles in its research. My experience with respect to meeting the criteria of the Declaration of Helsinki when applying to an ethics committee for approval has always been positive. I believe that part of that success has been due to research proposals with well-defined objectives and ensuring the protection of personal data. It is essential when working with minors, especially if they are institutionalized, to use anonymized data, i.e., there must be no possibility of identifying the participant. For this reason, as mentioned above, I leave it to the center itself to safeguard and request informed consent from the minors or legal representatives.

Although an attempt is made to preserve the identity of the participants, this is not always achieved. In research in which only a series of questionnaires are to be applied, it is easier to maintain anonymity due to the use of codes, which are normally generated by the center where the minor is serving a sentence (and which is the custodian of the list that matches the codes with the names). In this type of research with questionnaires, there is no interaction with the minor at any time, but when the investigation requires a personal interview with the participant, maintaining anonymity is complex. It is not uncommon for them to spontaneously disclose personal information, such as the name or surname, details of family members, home address, or even worse, to disclose information about the commission of a criminal act. When the minor discloses personal information in the context of the interview, this information should not be used or recorded by the researcher beyond the interview with the participant. In the case of a disclosure of a criminal act (whether real or not), the investigator should tell the child in the interview itself that this information should be brought to the attention of the person in charge of the center. When this has occurred during my research, in order not to break the confidentiality established with the participant, I tell the minor that I have to communicate this information and I accompany him/her to see the person in charge of the center and I ask the minor to reproduce the information just gave to me. When the interview is over, my usual practice is, together with the participant, to approach those in charge of the center to transmit the information so that the appropriate measures can be taken.

Specifically in the case of the study of minors with psychopathic traits, the ethical risks are numerous. The primary ethical issue is informed consent. For informed consent to be properly given, it must be made clear to the participant why, among other things, they are being asked to be part of a study (Tamatea, 2015). Nevertheless, when researching psychopathy, there arises a problem with writing down the

features sought in the sample as they do not, *a priori*, have positive connotations. In other words, the research seeks to assess people with high scores for lack of guilt, lack of remorse, difficulties in bonding, skill at manipulation, behavioral problems, etc. Given such an explanation, practically all subjects would refuse to take part in the study, even more so if those being assessed are minors and the consent of a parent is requested. In order to tackle this dilemma, some researchers have opted for trying to present the traits present in psychopathy with less pejorative connotations. To ask, for example, "Are you charming, intelligent, adventurous, aggressive and impulsive? Are you easily bored and do you live life to the limit? If you want to earn some easy money (\$25) by taking part in a confidential two-hour interview at the University of XXXX, please call XXXX to make an appointment. In order to take part, you must be a man aged over 18" (DeMatteo et al., 2006, p. 136).

Secondly, when the research involves institutionalized minors, it is necessary to obtain the informed consent not only of the participants but also of the person entrusted with their care and custody. This is often time consuming, an element that the researcher must factor in before gathering the data. It is generally complex to access a custodial facility, whether of adults or minors, but it is more complicated in the case of minors since they are a vulnerable population. In my personal experience, I have only been denied access in one study. In most cases, working with this population involves applying three types of tests: (i) questionnaires administered by the workers of the center itself, (ii) personal interview, and (iii) EEG to evaluate brain activity. Within these types of tests, the most sensitive information is that obtained through the EEG, since it is medical information about the subject. In my experience, the less invasive the tests to be applied, the more likely it is that the public custodial body agrees, *i.e.*, they would tend to agree to a questionnaire rather than an interview, or an interview rather than brain or laboratory tests. On every occasion that I have requested approval from an ethics committee for an EEG, the approval has been given. On the occasion that access was denied, I also intended to assess the cortisol levels of the participants and for this a saliva sample from the minors was needed. The penitentiary considered the saliva sample to be a biological sample of special protection and, even though the custody and destruction of the saliva sample after the study was guaranteed, authorization was not given by the prison.

Thirdly, it is worth asking what to do when parents or the participants themselves ask to see their results, *i.e.*, want to know whether they meet a diagnosis of psychopathy. As part of the structure of informed consent, the subject is also told that they have the right to know the results of the research. At this point, people being assessed sometimes confuse knowing the results of the research with being told whether they (or their children) meet the criteria for psychopathy. This dissemination of results must be treated with great caution, as the role of researcher is not that of a clinician undertaking a diagnosis or assessment. It is important for the researcher to flag up this circumstance before the parents and the minor sign the informed consent. Thus, if the question arises, the researcher must say that what they can offer is the results of the research and not individual assessments. In other words, aggregate data such as group averages or tendencies should be provided. Another

question is whether to offer the research results to the professionals working with the children. My usual practice is to offer individualized returns, with the results of the particular test since it is assumed that it is a professional who is already working with that data and with that individual. But in the case that the parents request the information, my practice is never to provide it, and to refer them to the professionals who work with the children. The informed consent indicates that both the subject being evaluated and his or her legal representative have the right to know the results of the research, but not to receive individualized reports.

Fourthly, it is imperative not to judge people with psychopathic traits. Psychopathy does not enjoy a positive image in popular culture. One only has to look at how the term is treated in the media: Every time a serious crime is committed, the person responsible for it is frequently categorized as a psychopath. Psychopathy is thus associated in the collective imagination with the gravity of an offense, and the culprit is considered to have a higher level of psychopathy in proportion to the crime. This popular notion is very harmful to research, as psychopathy is not diagnosed by the gravity of the crime. Although we start from the assumption that before setting out to assess psychopathy, a researcher must be familiar with the key concepts that define psychopathy, this kind of news also can have an influence on scholars' objective judgment when evaluating a profile. In order not to be swayed by such impressions, it is important to review, before going into the interview, the information we want to obtain. That way, there is always a script to refer to so as not to lose control of the interview.

Finally, as well as carrying out experimental research on this population, researchers investigate the ways in which these individuals can be helped not to harm others and to control their behavior – in other words, the best treatments for them are investigated. Typically, the chapters in psychopathy manuals dealing with the treatment of the pathology tend to be the shortest and are often quite pessimistic about the success of the therapies applied (Salekin et al., 2010). But without entering into a discussion about whether there is a valid treatment for such persons, the object of study raises important ethical questions. To attempt an explanation, we first need to bear in mind that for almost every other pathology described in the manuals of mental disorders, we encounter suffering in the individual. Common examples are persons experiencing anxiety, who are severely depressed, or have post-traumatic stress disorder, or think they are being persecuted or that others wish them harm. In all these cases, the person suffers. Finding a treatment therefore implies finding a way for them to suffer less. That does not happen in the case of psychopathy. As explained above, people with psychopathy do not feel fear, and thus do not experience anxiety or have strong bonds with other people (Frick et al., 2000). The question therefore arises as to whether trying to find a treatment for these people is primarily to help them – or rather to help them not harm others. How could they be helped? To follow the logic of this argument, if we require them to experience another person's feelings, and feel fear so that they can identify it in others in order to inhibit their harmful behaviors, would we not be provoking suffering in them to protect a hypothetical third person? It is questionable whether this would be ethical. In this study of psychopathy, therefore, the existing treatment options are

not clear, but if there were some and they could change relevant aspects of the psychopathic personality, would it be ethical to do so?

The emotional aspect of research is often neglected. Ethics committees analyze compliance with ethical and legal aspects, but pay little attention to the emotional impacts of the study on the research team. The management of emotions in this field of study has been complex for me. On the one hand, there is a fascination with evil that drives me to want to interview such profiles in order to understand the reasons why a person can harm another –sometimes in the cruelest ways, but at the same time, my object of study generates fear and insecurity. There is fear of the unknown, of the prison environment, of the potential participants, and of my personal safety. To deal with all these emotions, it has helped me to be able to talk (without revealing the identity of the participants) about the situations I experienced in the interviews with both my supervisors and other more experienced fellow researchers. At the beginning of my career, this was more difficult because in some way one feels guilty for experiencing these emotions given that it was a voluntary choice to study this type of population. But, even if that is the case, I advise any researcher working on these topics to look for people with whom they can debrief. In addition, I believe it is important to be honest and to personally assess whether there were any group of participants that one cannot work with due to the strong emotions that they trigger on the researcher (e.g., murderers, sex offenders, drug traffickers, and terrorists).

5 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

The study of psychopathy is an exciting field, one of those few areas of academic research where many of the pieces are still to fall into place, making it very intellectually stimulating. But it takes a toll to understand the mind of someone capable of causing so much harm in another person. To research criminal psychopathy is to constantly face harsh reality, where progress toward treatment is slow and the subjects leave many victims in their wake as the search for a solution goes on. One of the lessons learned about the study of this phenomenon is precisely that working with the perpetrator makes it difficult to work with the victim. It is very difficult to assess a case of psychopathy while also knowing the victim, how the crime was committed and what psychological consequences it has left them. It is a challenge to maintain an optimal level of objectivity in conducting the research, and this can lead to the magnifying of psychopathic features and the creation of poorly defined comparison groups (psychopaths vs nonpsychopaths). Assigning subjects to the wrong group has a crucial impact on the course of research and on its implications, because if the group of psychopaths does not really conform to the defining features of the disorder, the conclusions will be false.

In my personal experience, I have found the best way not to lose objectivity and to protect myself emotionally from information about victims is to go to the interview with the participant with the minimum of information about his or her case. I try to prepare well for the interview so that I know what kind of information I want

to gather and how to ask the right questions, but without consulting anything in the subject's file or asking the professionals working with the minor about the case. I do this despite the fact that the PCL-R manual clearly states that the researcher should consult files or reports on the participant before the interview. A few months before writing this chapter, I had an experience that may well illustrate this method of working. I had the opportunity to interview in prison a 23-year-old who had killed his uncle, aunt, and a nephew and a niece, aged 1 and 3. Afterward, he dismembered all the bodies, put them in plastic bags, and left the house. Due to the brutality of the facts, the case was widely reported in the media, which caused many journalists to follow the case in depth. When the media interest had died down and the murderer was by then in prison with a final sentence, I requested authorization from the prison where he was being held to interview him and assess whether he had psychopathic characteristics. To agree to study this type of case may seem complex, but in reality, this is not so if the objectives of the study are well defined, being clear about what and why that person is being evaluated. It should be made clear that the reason for studying the case is not due to the media impact, but for the purposes of serious and rigorous research.

Before the interview, I decided to meet with a journalist who had closely followed the trial and had just written a book with all the details of the crime, which I read with the intention of being well prepared for the interview with the inmate. At that moment, it coincided that, in my private life, I had two close relatives of similar ages to the nephew and niece of the murderer and I could not read the part of the journalist's book in which she described how the perpetrator ended the lives of the children, and much less did I feel strong enough to go and interview the person who had committed such crime. I was too emotionally involved to be able to assess with any objectivity whether or not he had psychopathic characteristics. I had, therefore, to let several months pass until I could exercise more control over my emotions and really focus on the information I needed for the study, in which I also concluded that the offender did not meet the criteria for psychopathy.

As mentioned at the start of this section, when studying criminal psychopathy, researchers need to be prepared to deal with frustration and uncertainty. Subjects with this profile constantly seek to deceive, presenting an image that is not real, trying to manipulate in order to obtain benefits or rewards; and their treatment constitutes one of the biggest challenges currently facing psychology and psychiatry. More than once, I have finished talking to an intern and on checking the information on his case, I found that nothing the subject had told me was true. Other times, I realized in the middle of the interview that the subject is not being truthful. In these cases, I have learned not to confront the deception for several reasons. This is, firstly, because lying is an aspect to evaluate in order to know whether a person presents psychopathic characteristics or not, so knowledge of what really happened is not, I believe, of interest in assessing psychopathy. Secondly, I think that generating a climate of confrontation in the interview is counter-productive. With this type of profile, where achieving rapport in the interview is so complex, a confrontational attitude on the part of the interviewer would only generate monosyllabic answers (yes/no) in the participant.

After more than 15 years of interviewing people with psychopathy, including adults, adolescents, and children, I draw one important lesson. The preparation of the interview has to be exhaustive; nothing can be left to improvisation. Persons with psychopathy are highly manipulative, and the PCL (Psychopathy Checklist) interview technique has to be thoroughly studied before interviewing any participant. As an example of this preparation, let me return to the case mentioned earlier about the young man who killed his family. In my last interview with him, he passed me under the bars a piece of paper with some handwritten lines, three lines in blue, three in black, and three in red, written in English, even though I communicated with him in Spanish. There was no logical connection between one sentence and another, even after a Google search. Faced with these facts, I felt the urge to go back to see him immediately so that he could explain to me what those phrases meant. Nevertheless, the experience has taught me that it is essential to wait, ignore rushed emotions and not get carried away by the impulse of the moment. Otherwise, if the interview is not well prepared, beyond asking him why, he will take control of the interview and make me lose my credibility as a researcher. I am, however, still waiting to see him again.

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Chapter 21

Researching Extremists and Terrorists: Reflections on Interviewing Hard-to-Reach Populations



Sarah L. Carthy  and Bart Schuurman 

1 Introduction

As one of the twenty-first century's defining security concerns, the perpetration of terrorist violence has drawn unprecedented levels of attention from scholars. Between al-Qaeda's 2001 attacks on the United States, the 'Global War on Terrorism' that followed, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and recent, growing, concerns over right-wing extremist violence, the study of terrorism is constantly evolving. However, the precipitous rise in terrorism-related research has unfolded in tandem with concern and critique as to the overall quality of the work being done (Lum et al., 2006; Schuurman, 2020; Silke, 2001). One of these concerns has been the inability, or hesitancy, of researchers to engage directly with their objects of study: those whose thoughts, feelings, or actions typify them as 'extremist'. Undoubtedly, this reluctance has been rooted, at least in part, in practicality. Extremism and terrorism are controversial and politicised subjects and gaining access to individuals who fit these monikers presents numerous logistical and ethical challenges. This chapter provides some background on the use of field research in this area and shares the authors' experiences of applying some of these techniques in gathering primary data. It is hoped that these sections will be a resource for other researchers exploring the phenomena of radicalisation, extremism, and terrorism and that our experiences will offer some insights into what it is like to gather data in this unique field of study.

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1.1 *Definition of the Phenomenon or Population*

One of the most challenging aspects of approaching this type of research is that of defining and operationalising key concepts. Since its earliest iterations, *terrorism* has proven a notoriously difficult phenomenon to define. Being both vague and imbued with explicit, negative connotations, the term has resisted attempts to reach a broad, definitional consensus (Richards, 2019). Within the research projects referred to here, we have tried to apply definitions which capture both the nature and nuance of the phenomenon. In this contribution, we use Schmid's (2011) 'Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism', operationalising terrorism as 'a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action' which unfolds without legal or moral restraints, usually targeted at civilians and non-combatants, performed for its 'propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties' (p. 86). Terrorism, in other words, uses the gruesome spectacle of death and injury to grab the attention of diverse audiences, coercing and intimidating opponents while attempting to inspire potential followers. Schmid's definition lays bare the key mechanism of terrorism (i.e. audience manipulation) and is applicable to state as well as non-state actors. This, in turn, affords it a greater degree of objectivity than some legal or governmental definitions.

Another definitional point of departure is that we see involvement in terrorism as only one of several possible outcomes resulting from the complex process of *radicalisation*. Another laden term, radicalisation is broadly seen as having cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Khalil et al., 2022). Most people who become sympathetic to the notion of terrorism and other forms of political violence as means for societal change do not engage in it themselves. Moreover, just as cognitive radicalisation can be seen as encompassing different *degrees* of support for terrorism (e.g. from general sympathy to the conviction it is a personal duty), so too can behavioural radicalisation consist of more outcomes than terrorist violence alone (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). In fact, most people who radicalise will enact their views in a variety of legal and illegal ways that fall (just) short of the threshold to terrorist attacks, such as spreading propaganda or engaging in hate crimes.

Although this heterogeneity is broadly represented in the current chapter, the populations we refer to do share one common characteristic: all are described as having 'radicalised to extremism'. In other words, all, have *in principle*, come to support the use of terrorism and other forms of political violence in pursuit of revolutionary aims. We thus purposefully exclude from our assessments those who might, more accurately, be, labelled as 'radicals'. While extremism is a frame of mind that tends to seek broad revolutionary change, explicitly requiring and advocating the destruction of the existing order, radicalism tends to prefer non-violent means in pursuit of more limited ends that can usually be accommodated within the existing socio-political system (Bötticher, 2017). While, statistically, the likelihood of an 'extremist' becoming involved in terrorism remains small (Neumann, 2013), it is, nonetheless, more plausible than it would be for a 'radical'; ascertaining this

degree of cognitive radicalisation was, therefore, an important inclusion criterion for the studies we reflect on here.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

The discussion of our fieldwork experiences draws from three independent research projects conducted between 2012 and 2022. Two of these are the authors' doctoral studies. One focused on understanding how and why individuals become involved in the Dutch homegrown jihadist 'Hofstadgroup'. This was an early example of a 'homegrown' jihadist group that became infamous after one of its participants murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 (Schuurman, 2018). The other PhD study dealt with how extremist narratives could be challenged (Carthy, 2020). The third, and most recent, project to which our discussion relates is a multi-year and multi-region study on why most individuals who radicalise do not actually become involved in terrorist violence (see Schuurman, 2020; Schuurman & Carthy, 2023a, b, c). Across these projects, interviewing is the principal fieldwork technique.

2.1 *Project 1: Studying Dutch Homegrown Jihadists*

The PhD project on the Hofstadgroup sought to reconstruct how and why its participants had radicalised. The idea for the project came from a study that Schuurman and a colleague were conducting on behalf of the Dutch National Police in 2011, which provided them with access to investigative files on the Hofstadgroup (Schuurman & Eijkman, 2015). At more than ten thousand pages of suspect and witness interviews, descriptions of evidence collected during house searches, wire-tap transcripts et cetera, the police files seemed like a 'treasure trove' for addressing some of the field's longstanding concerns about a lack of primary data (Schuurman, 2020). Hoping to utilise the potential of this material for his nascent PhD project, Schuurman followed standard Dutch practice for requesting access to police information for research purposes by submitting a formal written request to use the files for this purpose to the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (*Openbaar Ministerie*). It was granted in 2012. Given the privacy-sensitive nature of the files, strict anonymisation was one of the terms of use, meaning that none of the Hofstadgroup's participants are referred to by name in the PhD manuscript and related publications.

Once the allure of access to large quantities of privileged information (Bosma et al., 2020) had worn off, it also became apparent that the very specific purpose for which the files had been put together (namely, to enable criminal prosecution) required broadening the project's empirical foundations. To provide a counterpoint to an essentially governmental perspective on the group, Schuurman relied on

academic publications and media reporting and tried to obtain interviews with former participants. Having no previous experience with conducting interviews, let alone with hard-to-reach populations like (former) jihadists, this turned out to be a time-consuming yet ultimately worthwhile process. At $N = 5$, the number of former Hofstadgroup members interviewed was relatively small, yet their insights were essential, especially for illuminating internal group dynamics.

All data, whether primary or secondary, were analysed using a theoretical framework that incorporated structural, group, and individual-level explanations for involvement in terrorism. The results indicated that what initiated radicalisation processes was often different from what kept people involved in the Hofstadgroup. What it meant to be ‘involved’ in the group also took a variety of forms, ranging from some participants who simply enjoyed spending time with like-minded individuals to others who were highly committed to the violent pursuit of ideological goals. Other key findings included the absence of serious mental illness as an explanation for the group’s planned and executed acts of terrorism, as well as the escalatory dynamics stemming from hard-core participants’ increasingly antagonistic relations with the Dutch justice system. The project also noted the somewhat unsatisfying but still highly relevant influence of chance in bringing about involvement in this group (Schuurman, 2018).

2.2 Project 2. Exploring Narratives of Violent Extremism

The PhD project on countering extremist narratives emerged in response to a number of open calls for more theoretically informed methodologies to inform the development of strategies to ‘counter’ problematic, dominant narratives in the context of terrorism (i.e. counter-narratives, see Carthy, Doody, Cox, O’Hora & Sarma, 2020). Fieldwork for this project consisted of interviews with ten perpetrators of violent extremism across a spectrum of extremist contexts, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Mujahideen in Bosnia and Chechnya, al-Qaeda, and various white supremacist movements across North America. With an epistemological grounding in social constructionism, the aim of the fieldwork was to better understand the ‘content’ that a counter-narrative would be designed to counter. The first objective was to determine how individual and broader ‘template’ narratives of perpetration were constructed, guided by the question: ‘How do perpetrators explain, in story-like format, how they became involved in violent extremism?’ The second objective was to identify how violence, as opposed to non-violence, was depicted as an instrumental course of action.

Participants were recruited through networks of ‘formers’¹ and interviewed for 50 to 100 minutes, both in-person and online. The interview schedule was designed to encourage participants to recall moments in their lives when they legitimised violent extremism, while also encouraging narrativisation or ‘storied’ responses to particular prompts (Mishler, 1986, p. 233). To achieve this, Carthy delivered specific sets of prompt questions at relevant intervals to identify the story’s protagonists (‘Who would you like to hear your reasoning?’) and antagonists (‘Who would you *not* like to hear your reasoning?’) as well as the function (‘How is this story helpful/dangerous?’) of participants’ stories (see Smith, 2015). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, but the transcriptions did not contain participants’ names or any identifiable details. The data then underwent a three-stage procedure of familiarisation, coding, and analysis. The coded data were analysed using narrative analysis and clustered using a sociolinguistic syntax called Labovian Syntax (Labov, 1972, 2003).

It is important to note that this type of analysis does not place limits on the number of narratives that an individual can produce. On complex phenomena such as the perpetration of violence, an individual may have several, compacted stories, often interwoven to magnify particular feelings or meanings. For one participant, for example, Carthy identified four narratives legitimising the terrorist violence perpetrated by al-Qaeda, some rooted in the participant’s upbringing and early adulthood, some as recounted to them by others. In order to craft a compelling argument for attacks such as those of 11 September 2001, it was necessary for this participant to draw from a diverse arsenal of compelling stories.

Altogether, 32 ‘individual’ narratives were identified across ten interviews. The narratives contained several ‘techniques’ that helped legitimise violence, including depicting terrorist violence as reactionary and attributing indefensible positions to the target (e.g., explaining that their antagonist would “shoot [them] dead” in the absence of an equally violent response) in order to damage their character or credibility. While fallacious at times, a key observation by Carthy was that the narratives, nonetheless, reflected a great deal of rational logic, particularly with regard to orientation details (i.e. people, places, and times) which contextualised participants’ involvement in extremism. In this way, the findings supported the notion of a quasi-rational narrative of violent extremism; one in which the protagonist is portrayed with a great deal of complexity, while the antagonist is oversimplified.

¹Here, ‘former’ refers to an individual who has left extremism behind. It is important to note that a small number of participants objected to the label ‘former’, arguing that such terminology impeded a true understanding of their lived experience. Their *anomie* with political structures, they explained, did not exist solely in the past, nor did they consider their thought-patterns to have dramatically transformed to the point of classifying them as a ‘former’ anything. This is a complex idea, and one that, unfortunately, cannot be unpacked within the scope of the current chapter. Suffice to say that we apply the term ‘former’ loosely, conscious that it is not a perfect description of participants in Project 2.

2.3 *Project 3. Understanding Non-involvement in Terrorist Violence*

The final piece of fieldwork included in this chapter was part of a multi-year and multi-region project undertaken by both authors on non-involvement in terrorist violence. The objective of this project was to create a dataset of individuals who have radicalised to extremism, specifically including those who did not become terrorists. In practice, this meant gathering data on an elusive sub-set of an already hard-to-reach population; those who endorse terrorist violence but don't become involved in it themselves. Using the definitions provided in Sect. 1.1, we gathered data on 206 individuals, half of whom were 'involved' in terrorist violence, half who remained 'non-involved' throughout their entire radicalisation trajectories. All cases were at the end of their involvement trajectory (i.e. no longer active), and we focused on Salafi-Jihadists as well as right-wing extremists, considering these ideologies to represent the fulcrum of the contemporary, terrorist threat. We included cases from 13 countries across Europe and North America: the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Austria, Denmark, Australia, and Switzerland.

It is important to note that, due to travel restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, we could not rely on the type of fieldwork we had originally envisioned. For instance, it was no longer possible to follow the examples of other researchers and attend court cases, demonstrations, or use spaces in the community as starting points for identifying potential interviewees (Buijs et al., 2006; Groen & Kranenberg, 2010; Hemmingsen, 2011). In terms of data, we had to rely on the available academic literature, media accounts, any available legal documentation, access to police investigative files granted for some of the Dutch cases ($n = 19$), autobiographical accounts ($n = 56$), and, where possible, semi-structured interviews conducted remotely ($n = 37$). It is these interviews which will form the basis of our fieldwork discussion on this project. The data for this project were analysed quantitatively as part of an extensive 159-item codebook on structural-, group-, and individual-level factors associated with terrorism involvement (Schuurman & Carthy, 2023a, b, c).

3 Techniques Employed

Over the past two decades, several scholars have offered reflections on conducting fieldwork on extremism and terrorism, noting the emotional demands (McGowan, 2020; Orsini, 2013; Woon, 2013), the degree of personal risk (Ranstorp, 2007; Schmidt, 2021), as well as novel, ethical dilemmas which may be faced (Grossman & Gerrand, 2021). Others have remarked that these considerations are frequently raised by universities' ethics and safety committees, even to the point of impeding ethical approval for the research itself (Sluka, 2020; Youngman, 2020). Our

reflection on our own fieldwork experiences touches on some of these issues, but is primarily a personal account of the process, challenges, and benefits of interviewing extremists and terrorists whose radicalisation trajectories have—in most cases—ended. We will begin by discussing the techniques we employed to gain access to our research subjects as well conduct effective interviews. We then discuss the challenges we encountered; from writing ethics applications and convincing interviewees to speak with us, to more emotionally and ethically taxing issues such as (instrumentally) empathising with people who have used violence, determining how much of ‘ourselves’ to disclose in interviews, and considering whether or not to financially incentivise participation in research.

3.1 *Gaining Access*

3.1.1 **The Use of Gatekeepers**

Snowball sampling, or ‘chain referral’, is a common method of sampling hard-to-reach populations. This technique relies on a series of referrals to potential interviewees by others who may have experienced or have experience with the phenomenon of interest. Because the chain-referral technique introduces a sampling bias (i.e. the probability of a participant being included in the sample is not equivalent for all those who share similar characteristics), it is best described as a method of non-probability sampling. However, while this approach to sampling is widely adopted in qualitative research, it is not without its challenges. Carthy recalls using, with little success, chain referral in Project 2 to gain access to a former foreign fighter who had recently returned from Syria. Despite an acquaintance making the initial connection through e-mail, neither the acquaintance nor the referee knew each other in any formal capacity. While the referee initially agreed to an interview, shortly before the interview was due to take place, the referee disclosed that they were not comfortable speaking about their experience and would prefer to cancel.

Carthy reflected on this encounter, regretting, principally, that an individual who was not comfortable speaking about their experience was sampled. The logic of the chain referral is to avoid directly approaching potential interviewees (see Sect. 3.1.2) but, through misinterpretation of the relationship between the referrer and the referee, the outcome, in this instance, was comparable. For this reason, it is important to consider the relationship between referrer and referee, and this is where well-positioned gatekeepers can be crucial.

Not only do gatekeepers provide access to remote or furtive settings (e.g. extremist milieus or services accessed by formers), but their connection to such settings allows for the formation of inclusion and exclusion criteria in terms of sample selection. Although this is still a form of non-probability sampling, the strategy is no longer snowballing but *purposive*. In other words, even though the sampling is based on individual connections or ‘chains’, the chains in the chain referral are

carefully selected and established to create a more representative sample (Penrod et al., 2003) and, importantly, a level of sensitivity on the part of the referrer.

It is important to remember that this is a population of individuals who would not ordinarily participate in research. Without the help of an intermediary who is familiar with research, the intention of the researcher may appear cryptic and the differences between a researcher and, for example, a reporter may not be immediately obvious.² When gatekeepers were used in Projects 2 and 3, Carthy keenly observed that interviewees' willingness to participate was borne almost exclusively out of loyalty and generosity to their respective gatekeeper.

Reflecting on our own fieldwork, we have, where possible, tried to incorporate gatekeepers who operate in a formal capacity to counter or prevent violent extremism (P/CVE). From practitioners involved in 'Exit' programmes to those in probation services conducting reintegration work, these types of gatekeepers have played a vital role in reassuring potentially apprehensive participants as to our intentions. For Carthy, gaining access to former members of the Provisional IRA (PIRA), for instance, would not have been possible without the support of a gatekeeper who was also a member of the PIRA and now worked in education and advocacy. This connection was made gradually. A researcher and colleague who knew the gatekeeper made the initial introduction over e-mail. What followed was an e-mail exchange and a phone call before the gatekeeper agreed to provide access to a sample of former prisoners in Northern Ireland. Carthy has since introduced this gatekeeper to another researcher who has gained access in a similar way.

However, that is not to say that incorporating gatekeepers is without its challenges. Schuurman, for instance, faced difficulties getting *past* gatekeepers when he was working on his PhD. His experiences in this regard relate to requests to Dutch probation service staff and municipal employees to facilitate access to (former) extremists, including both those still in prison and others already released on parole. In several conversations held intermittently across a number of years, these professionals were gracious with their time and usually empathised with the researcher's request. However, actual interviews never materialised from this approach, usually related to (wholly understandable) concerns over how the interviewee might react to someone asking them to dig through recollections of their extremist past.

3.1.2 Directly Approaching Potential Interviewees

Depending on the particulars of the research project, directly approaching potential interviewees may be a viable alternative, or complement, to using gatekeepers. It is important to note, however, that this sampling approach is distinct from 'cold-calling' (a methodological approach which has received mixed appraisal, see Drabble et al. (2016)), in that it is not intended as a data collection tool. In our own

²Indeed, even with the best of intentions, researchers in this line of research have, in the past, let participants down (see Sect. 4.5), and created trepidation when it comes to research participation.

work, we have used this technique to make initial contact with potential interviewees, with the hope of organising a formal interview at another time. With this approach, however, there are some things to consider.

First, it is important to establish whether a potential interviewee is still active in an extremist milieu. Compared to interviewing formers, approaching an individual who is still aligned with an extremist belief system represents a markedly different dynamic; one which we, as researchers, have generally avoided. Safety concerns aside, we have come to think that interviewees may be more able to objectively reflect on their radicalisation process once it has ceased, although retrospective accounts do increase the risk of post hoc rationalisations (Freilich & LaFree, 2016). This is not to say that collecting data on active extremists or terrorists is not a fruitful pursuit; however, it may present additional challenges when interpreting the reliability of the material so gained.

Second, it is important to establish whether a potential interviewee's involvement in extremism is sufficiently in the past and, if not, how that may emotionally affect them. It goes without saying that the risk of emotional distress is heightened as interviewees recount particularly traumatic periods in their lives, and the lives of those around them. When potential interviewees can look back on an involvement in extremism that was years ago, they are not only more likely to be able to reflect with some critical distance,³ but are also less likely to have legal proceedings or prison sentences hanging over them.

Finally, before approaching an individual directly, it is important to determine whether they have a public profile that invites the opening of communication. In the example provided at the beginning of Sect. 3.1.1, the referee was not in the public eye, nor had they ever spoken openly about their experience. If individuals have written books about their experiences, or are involved in Exit-work, they may be more willing to participate in research. They are also more likely to have publicly listed e-mail addresses, social media accounts, or publishers that can be used as intermediaries. For former right-wing extremists active in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, direct approaches along these lines have turned out to be very fruitful. We believe that this may be rooted in the time that has elapsed since their involvement. As jihadism in Europe and North America is generally a far more recent phenomenon, direct approaches to reaching this population have been far less effective in our experiences.

3.1.3 Accessing Public Prosecution Service Files

Though stretching the limits of what could be considered fieldwork, accessing 'official' data sources on extremism and terrorism (in this case, files put together by the Dutch public prosecution service) is another technique which can be used to gather

³It is important to note, however, that interviewing individuals who have spent a great deal of time reflecting on their experiences is not without its challenges. This is discussed in more detail in Sect. 3.2.3.

information on radicalised individuals. However, this approach has its own set of access-related challenges. At least in the Dutch context, one challenge has been the wait time associated with processing access requests. For both Schuurman's PhD and the more recent project on non-involvement in terrorist violence, as well as several smaller studies undertaken in-between, access requests took around three months to be granted. This makes using such material really only feasible for longer-term projects. If granted, access to this material is limited to the applicant and all data drawn from the files has to be strictly anonymised. While neither of these requirements are difficult to accommodate in a practical sense, they do raise a larger issue to do with transparency. Namely, that other scholars are essentially unable to verify claims made on the basis of privileged access to sensitive sources. This limitation is discussed in more detail in Sect. 4.5.

3.1.4 Language Considerations

As alluded to in an earlier section, navigating language in this field of research can be difficult. In the absence of agreed-upon definitions of many of our central concepts, there is always a risk that certain words or phrases will resonate with some individuals while causing offence to others. When approaching a gatekeeper, for instance, it is important to understand their personal stance on the thoughts or actions of their affiliates and appreciate that many will not comprehensively condemn them. In her fieldwork, Carthy observed that terms such as 'terrorism', 'violent extremism', or 'formers' caused offence, whereas terms such as 'indiscriminate violence against civilians', 'violence against a perceived outgroup', or 'those who are no longer associated with [particular movement]' were less provocative. Exercising caution and distilling concepts down to indisputable actions or behaviours is less likely to create backlash.

However, being careful with language should not veer too much into legalese. An area in which overly technical language can be a barrier is in the initial communication sent to the potential interviewee. During his PhD project, Schuurman tried to accompany his initial request for a meeting with a list of formal steps taken to protect interviewee privacy and safety. While well-intentioned, the verbose and formal messages that resulted appeared to have put off at least a number of potential interviewees. For the most recent project described in this chapter, Schuurman relied instead on brief initial notes that simply said what he was working on and whether the person in question would be willing to have a brief introductory phone or Skype call. This appears to have been a far more successful approach. Once contact had been established, and the importance of informed consent explained, the technically worded consent form was, usually, no longer a hurdle.

3.2 *The Interview Format*

The following sections will detail some techniques we have used to conduct effective remote and face-to-face interviews with former extremists and terrorists.

3.2.1 **Managing Expectations**

A potential ethical issue when interviewing individuals about violent extremist experiences (even if those lie in the past) is offering a false impression of the researcher being able to improve the interviewee's personal situation. Dolnik (2011, p. 11) provides the example of individuals asking for direct favours such as 'public exposition of their suffering (...) material compensation [or] assistance in immigration issues'. As well as putting the researcher in an uncomfortable position, this may lead to the participant feeling taken advantage of if they are not assisted. In our own fieldwork, we found it beneficial to open the interview with a statement to the effect that, 'although the project cannot benefit you personally, the knowledge gained will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the problem'. In this way, the participants' expectations could be managed, and the interview could continue without reservation.

3.2.2 **Establishing Rapport**

Establishing initial contact with potential interviewees and managing expectations are important first steps towards conducting interview-based fieldwork. Yet, they do not guarantee that the actual interview will yield in-depth and detailed information or that the research question(s) will be addressed effectively. This is especially the case when the research question(s) relate to deviant forms of behaviour such as terrorism. To increase the likelihood that an interview will bear fruit, we have often found it necessary to start by establishing personal rapport.

Here, rapport broadly refers to the establishment of an interpersonal connection based on a degree of empathy and interest in the other, not just as a potential source of information, but as a human being. Verbal techniques for establishing rapport may include using the interviewee's first name or asking open-ended questions unrelated to the topic of the interview. Non-verbal rapport-building tools can include using eye-contact, animated facial expressions, and reassuring tones of voice (Duggan, 2001). In her own fieldwork, Carthy has relied on a number of rapport-building techniques, some of which differ across interview settings.

For in-person interviews, Carthy chose to conduct her interviews in locations familiar to the interviewee. For remote interviews, however, Carthy placed special emphasis on allowing the interviewee to select the time and date of the interview. While this sometimes meant that interviews were conducted at unsocial hours, it also meant that interviewees were in a familiar rhythm, creating the necessary

conditions for rapport. For example, Carthy recalls connecting with a former white supremacist who was a self-described ‘night-owl’ and preferred working in the middle of the night. In both instances, the goal was to reduce the likelihood that the environment would pose a distraction, decreasing cognitive load and allowing the interviewee to ‘settle in’ to the interview.

In the early stages of an interview, small habits like thanking the interviewee for their time, sharing any trepidation, and spending time speaking about unrelated topics all helped establish a connection and overcome a sense of detachment (see also: Post & Berko, 2009). To maintain rapport during the interview, both Carthy and Schuurman found it effective to explicitly acknowledge that they, the researchers, were being trusted with personal information and to emphasise the value they placed on it. Oftentimes, there is no reward or clear incentive for participation in research on extremism and terrorism (this is discussed in more detail in Sect. 4.4) and, for this reason, it is critical that the value of the interview is explicitly communicated. Though simply ‘having a chat’ is often key to establishing rapport, we chose to move onto semi-structured formats for the substantive part of our interviews. While we wanted to put our interviewees at ease, we also wanted to gather information in a coherent fashion. Establishing rapport first and then drawing on a semi-structured format often allowed us to do both.

It is important to iterate that rapport is not only useful in conducting a substantive interview. In our experience, it has also facilitated informed consent and gave us more freedom in recording the subsequent conversation. Once small talk had established a degree of trust between interviewer and interviewee, the more formal issues surrounding informed consent and whether the interview would be recorded, were generally easier to tackle.

3.2.3 Overcoming ‘Rehearsed’ Responses

It is commonplace for former extremists and terrorists to share their experiences with each other, as well as with broader audiences, as part of so-called ‘Exit’ work intended to help others navigate their departure from extremism. During Project 3, Carthy observed that former extremists drew considerable support from meetings with others who had similarly distanced themselves from their erstwhile extremist convictions and associated social networks. However, the interconnectedness of this community can also have some undesirable implications for fieldwork; namely, it can lead to a ‘cross-contamination’ of stories, whereby the underlying mechanisms underpinning certain thoughts, feelings, or behaviours become oversimplified to line up with an established narrative. Simply put, the stories can start to sound similar.

Carthy recalls listening to an interview with a white nationalist who she had interviewed some years earlier and noting how, over the years, their involvement story had become condensed into a soundbite (‘identity, meaning, looking for answers’). Having told their story so often, the interviewee had come up with a quick way of communicating it but, as a result, had compromised its distinctiveness.

In many ways, this observation is not surprising. Human beings naturally draw upon key moments in their lives in a story-like format and, overtime, giving rehearsed responses can become unavoidable. This allows them, as the narrator, to place meaning on otherwise isolated events (Kirkman, 2002, p. 33), something radicalised individuals ostensibly seek (Kruglanski et al., 2013). Unfortunately, this can also interfere with the reliability of the information gathered during an interview.

As pointed out by Dolnik (2013), no interviewer wants to walk away from an interview ‘with only what the terrorist wants to project’ (p. 47) and, fortunately, certain types of analysis offer practical workarounds when responses start to become rehearsed. As mentioned in Sect. 2.2, structural narrative analysis (Smith, 2015, p. 218), for instance, provides a mechanism for overcoming somewhat flat answers by using circulation (‘Who would you like to hear/not hear your reasoning?’), connection (‘Who does this reasoning connect you to?’), and function questions (‘How is this story helpful/dangerous?’). By being aware of these tendencies and introducing novelty using interview templates, there is a great deal of potential for original, thoughtful content from interviews with former extremists and terrorists.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

In the following sections, we reflect on some of the ethical and emotional aspects of conducting interviews with (former) extremists and terrorists, including balancing risk versus reward, engaging with research ethics committees, and managing the interview dynamic.

4.1 *Risk Versus Reward*

In any empirical investigation in which the object of study is disproportionately at risk of ‘harm or wrong’ (i.e. vulnerable), the onus is on the researcher to consider and determine that the risks and benefits are appropriately balanced (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017, p. 2). Even before gaining access to our sample(s), we were conscious that in most Western countries, radicalised individuals are a small and difficult-to-reach population. Indeed, compared to other areas of research on violence or physical harm-related topics, such as homicide or road-traffic accidents (Nemeth & Mauslein, 2019; Ruby, 2002), the actual incidence, while difficult to gauge, is likely not as widespread as one would think. Within this relatively small population, those individuals who are willing to speak to researchers about their experiences are even less common (Horgan, 2012).

For this reason, one of the most important considerations before entering the field is to understand that opportunities to speak with (formerly) radicalised individuals are infrequent and should not be misused, either through inexperience or through the application of poor methodologies. An individual who Carthy

interviewed as part of Project 2 spoke openly, some years later, about their feelings of exploitation at the hands of researchers who were more interested in treating the individual like an information resource than as a human being. Although the interviewee did not display similar unease during the interview with Carthy, their point is an important one. Oftentimes, contributing to knowledge is the only immediate benefit of participation; if fieldwork is premature, forced, or lacking direction, this will decrease the benefit to the participant and tip the balance towards risk.

4.2 *Research Ethics Committees*

For any research project which involves human subjects and, by extension, ethical approval by a university ethics committee, the researcher must demonstrate two things: first, that the data-gathering approach employed is *necessary* and second, that any *predictable risk* to either the research participant or the researcher is, by design, minimised. While it is not often difficult to communicate the value of research on extremism and terrorism to an ethics committee, convincing them that such a pursuit presents minimal risks is more challenging. That being said, by emphasising the following points, neither Carthy nor Schuurman have ever had a project rejected by an ethics committee, despite some initial trepidation.

First and foremost, it was crucial that the committee understood that the research participants, by design, could not pose a threat to the researcher. This was done by emphasising that individuals who were still radicalised could not be sampled (i.e. a sampling criterion was that interviewees were ‘formers’) and that the interviews would be conducted in public places (e.g. a café, a room at university) or online.

Second, it was important to demonstrate that attention had been paid to the safety and welfare of the participant(s). Across all projects, both authors were required to produce information sheets about the projects (and the purpose of the interviews) to disseminate to potential participants, as well as consent forms. Especially in Schuurman’s experience, many interviewees remained hesitant to sign their names on a consent form or to have the interview recorded. To accommodate this, Schuurman would send signed consent forms to the interviewee, thereby making sure that they at the very least had his signed promise to protect their privacy and security in a number of ways. He also relied on copious amounts of hand-written notes which, while certainly less ideal than an audio recording, did serve to record key details while also being less of a stressor to the interviewee than a recording device.

If interviews were to be recorded, participants were required, during the recording, to restate that they consented to the recording and that they understood that the recording would be transcribed, and any identifiable details removed. To protect participants’ identities, the recordings were deleted upon transcription, interviewees were given a pseudonym, and they were sent a copy of any transcripts or recordings to maximise transparency. Crucially, no information that could be used to identify the interviewee would ever make it into a publication (e.g. no names, dates of birth or specific details of offences committed).

Furthermore, Carthy found that the ethics committee at her university were reassured by a great deal of operational detail. For in-person interviews, this included preparing a ‘safety protocol’ which outlined the conditions under which an in-person interview would take place, including locations and, in the case of Project 2, the role of the supervisor in confirming times and locations and, after the interview, debriefing. A protocol for participant distress may also be necessary, depending on the scope of the interview. Finally, both Carthy and Schuurman have found it beneficial to use encryption software (e.g., VeraCrypt) to store transcripts and any unprocessed audio recordings to ensure that loss or theft of the data carrier will not risk impinging on interviewees’ privacy or safety.

4.3 Unwittingly Validating Others’ Views

As mentioned, a key criterion for inclusion in Carthy’s research was that participants were no longer radicalised. However, despite establishing this criterion prior to the interview, she noted how several participants continued to espouse xenophobic views towards certain communities despite having renounced their extremist beliefs and behavioural intentions more broadly. As part of Project 2, Carthy spoke with a former bomb-maker who explained that while they renounced terrorism ‘today’, they regretted nothing about their past involvement. Indeed, in line with the literature on de-radicalisation, a clear differentiation exists between the renunciation of particular beliefs and behavioural disengagement from extremist groups or violent behaviour (see Della Porta & LaFree, 2012). People may ‘disengage’ behaviourally, while not ‘deradicalising’ cognitively (i.e. even so-called formers may continue to hold (some) views that an interviewee may consider extremist). For this reason, it is not surprising that some participants continued to retain polarising views, nor were these views necessarily extraneous to the research aims and objectives.

As outlined in earlier sections, the objective of Carthy’s research in Project 2 was to identify and understand the means and mechanisms by which violence against perceived outgroups could be justified. In fact, it was integral to the project that participants’ accounts reflected their genuine, candid reasoning at the time. Any perception by the interviewee of judgement or rebuke on the part of the interviewer could jeopardise this objective and impede frank disclosure. However, an ethical issue which can arise from this dynamic (and, indeed, any effort to build rapport with extremists or terrorists) is that of seeming to ‘legitimise’ or validate extremist thoughts or actions. This was a challenge that both Carthy and Schuurman encountered across all of the projects referred to in this chapter.

To address this issue, Dolnik (2011) suggests that interviewers should avoid actively contributing their own view unless expressly asked. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, and Carthy recalls several incidents in which she was asked to ‘weigh in’ on complex themes. In such cases, an approach used by Dolnik (who attributes its use to hostage negotiators) is to find empathetic ways of validating the grievances behind specific actions while carefully distancing those grievances from

subsequent actions (2011, p. 12). For example, when asked by a former Mujahideen fighter in Bosnia and Chechnya what she would do if her community were being unfairly treated and targeted, Carthy legitimised the interviewee's grievance ('that must have been a frightening situation for you and your family') but did not connect the grievance to particular actions ('it is impossible for me to put myself in that position or say what I would have done'). While evasive answers are not always optimal, this differentiation between grievances and actions makes it more difficult for the dynamic to be misconstrued as legitimising violence.

There is also the possibility that an interviewee will try to rattle the interviewer, perhaps in an attempt to get them to show their 'true colours' or simply because it amuses them. Allowing provocations to hit home and trigger a fierce rebuttal can jeopardise the interview. At the same time, however, letting grievous statements simply slide can lead to discomfort about seeming to legitimise extremist views by not challenging them. Schuurman recalls a situation in which an interviewee appeared to be trying to get under his skin by telling him, within a few minutes of the conversation's start, that the government had for years been trying to determine whom he had had sex with. Noticing that this strange and, in actuality rather more strongly worded, anecdote did not elicit much response, the interviewee seemed to escalate to more ideologically provocative statements, largely about how Nazi Germany's operation on the Eastern Front during World War 2 had been for the benefit of mankind. Not rising to the bait allowed Schuurman to get to the actual questions, but the entire conversation did leave him feeling slightly tarnished for not having spoken up in defence of the millions murdered by the Nazi regime.

4.4 Revealing Information About Yourself

While validating inappropriate views should be avoided in any interview dynamic, the question remains, to what extent should the researcher share *any* personal thoughts or feelings with an interviewee? In their research with rape survivors, Campbell et al. (2010, p. 62) stress the importance of equalising the power imbalance by letting participants see into the 'world' of the researcher. Mutual disclosure, they argue, can break down barriers to 'real conversation' (p. 74) and allow for those genuine experiences to be accessed. Although it would be remiss to compare those who have espoused extremist views with victims of sexual assault, one point of comparison between these populations may be their cultural and social isolation, leading them to seek reassurance as to whether their experience is 'normal'. In other areas of fieldwork with similarly isolated populations, such as those who have suffered pregnancy loss (Andalibi et al., 2018) or LGBT+ communities (Jowett et al., 2011), mutual disclosure has been described as a critical mechanism for establishing empathy, trust, and rapport. Indeed, when interviewing former political prisoners in Northern Ireland as part of Project 2, Carthy recalls drawing on her Catholic upbringing to connect with participants' narratives of culture and identity. Although she had little to disclose in terms of personal victimisation, she found that her

willingness to relate to participants' religious identity allowed for greater depth of discussion on certain topics.

However, revealing information about oneself can also be problematic. As part of an interview for Project 3, Carthy did not wish to disclose, when asked, her parents' occupations. She found the question unnecessary and probing, particularly as it was asked in the context of social class. In this particular instance, Carthy answered the question but, on reflection, regretted revealing the information and, in subsequent interviews, would actively steer the conversation away from her family and upbringing. On illicit topics where the researcher would likely feel uncomfortable disclosing past experiences (e.g. prostitution solicitation, see Hammond, 2018), mutual disclosure has also been deemed inappropriate.

Broadly speaking, both authors have found it helpful to consider the *function* of mutual disclosure. If the function is to demonstrate to participants that they are not alone, there are other ways of achieving this. Drawing from the researcher's body of experience with other radicalised individuals may reassure participants that their past attitudes and behaviours, while harmful, are not anomalous. Such reassurances need not go into detail; for Carthy, assuring participants that, 'we have seen this with other radicalised people' or, 'this is something we've come to learn from other interviews' can create the same effect of empathy and trust-building without compelling the researcher to disclose specific, personal details about themselves or their families.

4.5 Financially Incentivising Participation

Even several years after disengaging, it is an unfortunate reality that many formerly radicalised individuals will find themselves with fewer employment-related opportunities than non-radicalised individuals. This may be the case for a number of reasons. First, radicalisation tends to unfold in early adulthood, a period when young people will typically spend time pursuing education or gaining the necessary experience to carve out a career, both of which function as part of a causal model of lifetime earnings (Card, 1999). The time spent engaging with extremist ideologies (many of which exist outside the realms of civic society) may detract from these pursuits and affect the radicalised individual's lifetime earning potential. Furthermore, the stigma associated with having been, at one time, a 'jihadist', a 'Nazi' or a 'Provo' could affect efforts or motivations to return to education or gain employment outside of extremist circles.

Irrespective of the underlying mechanisms at play, when these individuals are offered financial incentives to disclose their stories and participate in research, this disparity tips the balance of power, running the risk of the participant becoming somewhat dependent on the researcher. This power imbalance creates ethical issues, as well as methodological ones.

As part of Project 3, the authors were offered such an opportunity by a former neo-Nazi who was well-connected in former circles. The individual offered access to an untold number of potential interviewees by means of a contract and

cost-per-interview. While these types of opportunities are generally not lucrative enough to be termed empty choices,⁴ the dynamic is problematic in that it lends itself to participants exaggerating or fabricating elements of their story to guarantee more interest from researchers, violating the criterion of ‘believable descriptions and explanations’ for any qualitative sample (Abrams, 2010, p. 540). In such a system, there is also no way of knowing whether interviewees’ stories are genuine, nor is the balance of power adequate for candid disclosure. For this reason, neither author has ever offered financial incentives for participation. In the situation outlined above, we explained the ethical and methodological issues that such an arrangement would create, and although the participant was gracious, they did not provide access to any other participants beyond themselves.

4.6 Disclosure

A final set of ethical issues which may arise when collecting data on extremists or terrorists relate to disclosure; the risk of interviews leading participants to disclose incriminating or compromising information. Ours is not the first research area to be faced with this issue (Surmiak, 2020), nor are we the first researchers to comment on it in the context of terrorism (Dolnik, 2011; Hemmingsen, 2011). The conflict between ethical and legal responsibilities is salient for anyone conducting research on illegal activities.

During the infamous Boston College subpoenas scandal of 2011, researchers leading the ‘Belfast Project’ failed to fully inform participants to what degree they could protect their interview data, subsequently reneging on a priori assurances of confidentiality and passing along interview recordings to numerous authorities. The Boston College case has been described as a reckless approach to fieldwork and an attempt to ‘shirk’ ethical responsibilities to protect research participants (Palys & Lowman, 2012, p. 295). Ultimately, the events demonstrate how researchers can fail to protect interviewees if authorities take an interest in the data they gather.

Because of this case and others like it, we took steps to minimise the potential for disclosures of this nature. As mentioned in Sect. 4.2, participants were generally selected post-involvement, they were advised not to disclose anything that they have not previously disclosed to authorities, and they were fully anonymised in any publications pertaining to the research. Furthermore, we have tended to steer clear of ongoing criminal investigations, and we have made a point of not asking specific questions about the details of any criminal offences committed. For this reason, our fieldwork has not attracted undue attention from the media, nor have we been put into difficult, ethical positions comparable to the Boston College case. In fact, we

⁴The term ‘empty choice’ refers to the power imbalance created by individuals feeling as though they have no choice but to participate in research. This is a common ethical concern amongst biomedical researchers operating in sub-Saharan Africa who offer access to healthcare in exchange for research participation (Kingori, 2015, p. 772)

have so far not received a single request for access to the primary data that we have gathered for any of the projects described here.

Finally, there is another, more methodological, consideration relating to disclosure and the use of confidential sources in academic research. Although interviews with (former) extremists and terrorists can yield information and perspectives that would otherwise remain inaccessible, transcripts can usually not be made accessible for other researchers, limiting transparency and our peers' ability to replicate our findings. This also applies, though in a slightly different fashion, to information derived from governmental sources such as prosecution service dossiers. While anyone, at least in the Netherlands, can apply for access to such material, the route to replication is a time-consuming process even when permission is granted. It entails waiting several months for a response to the initial request, then contacting the particular public prosecutor's office where the files in question are stored to set up a meeting, then travelling to said location and looking up whether other researchers who have used this material have interpreted it correctly. However, beyond triangulation of such privileged material with publicly available sources where possible, there is, at present, little to be done about this situation.

5 Lessons Learned

It has been the intention of this chapter to demonstrate both the feasibility and utility of conducting interview-based fieldwork on extremists and terrorists. Through our own experiences, we have presented some practical techniques that can be implemented in similar contexts. However, we are also mindful that our experiences, while hopefully of some assistance, do not reflect the full depth and scope of fieldwork in this area. We have not engaged in participant observation, for instance, nor have we conducted ethnographic studies of those whom we seek to understand. What we offer, instead, is a portfolio of interviews with people of diverse convictions from which we have drawn a number of lessons. We will conclude this chapter with some more personal recollections, in line with one of the overarching goals of this edited volume.

Though it will come as no surprise to other researchers who have interacted directly with individuals who have been involved in acts of extreme violence (e.g. Hoffman, 2006; Horgan, 2004; Wood, 2018), their apparent 'normalcy' remains striking. While most scholars of terrorism take pains to avoid the empirically tenuous view of terrorists as wide-eyed fanatics or psychopaths unable to empathise with their victims (Crenshaw, 2007; Sarma, Carthy & Cox, 2022), the fact of their willingness to inflict great harm and suffering on others remains. Speaking with individuals who have legitimised and propagated extremist ideologies, committed hate crimes, or even engaged in terrorist attacks themselves, and noticing that they seem friendly, intelligent, and well-informed, can be jarring. Carthy spoke with a former al-Qaeda ideologue who described the 9/11 attacks as 'permissible'. When recounting an attack on an ethnic minority, a former Neo-Nazi described the

situation like a ‘cat playing with a toy’. When asked if there was a line that they would not cross, a former bomb-maker in Northern Ireland simply replied ‘no’. Listening to these stances can elicit feelings of contempt, hopelessness, and sorrow, particularly when thinking about victims of extremist violence. Similarly, Schuurman, on occasion, felt uncomfortably drawn between empathy and contempt, or even disgust. Empathy for the harrowing (childhood) experiences some interviewees recalled, or their understandable emotional reaction to instances of horrible suffering undergone by people they identified with. Contempt, however, for, in his view, the often ridiculous and societally damaging worldviews subsequently adopted; disgust, as well as sadness, when such convictions led to the perpetration of violence against innocent victims. However, while we have learned that these feelings can and do arise, they should never progress into *judgement* expressed to the interviewee.

Indeed, the discomfort that can arise from these encounters can serve as a reminder to researchers of their own biases. Schuurman, for example, once mistakenly categorised a former extremist as having been non-involved in terrorist violence, simply because their bearing and demeanour seemed to support this, and because there was very little publicly available information available on the individual’s past conduct. Subsequently finding out that this person had, in fact, personally committed a terrorist attack using explosives and served significant time in prison because of it, was a stark reminder to avoid assumptions wherever possible.

Speaking with individuals who held extremist views but did *not* act on them provides glimpses of another uncomfortable truth, albeit one that should be evident for any student of history. Namely, that people can be intelligent, educated, and sociable, while at the same time consciously holding views whose implementation would lead to the murder of thousands, and the forced relocations of many more. This realisation can be jolting and may even risk the development of a quiet cynicism. Nevertheless, our fieldwork also reminds us of human beings’ capacity for reflection and change, even in the most immersive and destructive of environments.

In our experiences, neither extremists nor terrorists are usefully viewed as a ‘class apart’. Interviews are not only an important data-gathering tool, but a way for the researcher to challenge her or his own misunderstandings and biases about just what it means for an individual to ‘be radicalised’ or ‘involved in terrorism’. Hopefully, the experiences and reflections shared in this chapter will be of some benefit to other scholars looking to conduct interviews with these hard-to-reach populations.

In closing, it feels appropriate to also contextualise the role of the individual, and therefore, the value of interviews with them, when it comes to understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of involvement in terrorism. There is a risk, as scholars of this subject have long understood (Neidhardt, 1982), of addressing such complex questions exclusively through the lens of individual psychological or biographical assessments. The mechanisms underpinning terrorism and extremism extend beyond the individual to group and movement dynamics, as well as the broader social, political, and historical setting against which dissent, unrest, and violence occur. It is only in recognition of this broader context that interviews can gain their full value.

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Chapter 22

Conducting Research with, and on Perpetrators of Domestic and Family Violence: Insights from Australian Research



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1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the volume of research on domestic and family violence (DFV) has increased significantly. This research has shown that DFV, an umbrella term defined here as physical, non-physical, and sexual abuse perpetrated against a current or former intimate partner or family member (e.g. sibling, parent, grandparent), is one of the most common and costly forms of violence internationally. World Health Organization (WHO) statistics suggest that, globally, over one in four women (27%) aged 15–49 years who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by a current or former partner (Sardinha et al., 2022). Although there are no comparable global statistics for other forms of DFV (e.g. child abuse, elder abuse, sibling violence and child-to-parent abuse), Australian statistics indicate that approximately 13 per cent of Australian adults have experienced physical or sexual abuse as children (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017), while the estimated rate of elder abuse in Australia is 14.8 per cent (Qu et al., 2021). Further, in a recent Australian study of 5000 people aged 16–20, one in five respondents said that they had perpetrated abuse against a family member in their lifetime (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). The same study revealed that

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one in two young people had experienced DFV between other family members prior to the age of 20 years. Meanwhile, in Australia alone, the cost of violence against women and their children (including DFV) has been estimated to be AUD \$22 billion annually (KPMG, 2016).

Global understandings of DFV have primarily been informed by research conducted on and with victims-survivors. In particular, DFV researchers, ourselves included, have primarily been preoccupied with understanding the nature and impacts of DFV, and the support needs of victims-survivors. Further, research that aims to measure the prevalence of DFV within the community has largely involved surveys which ask respondents about their *experiences* of DFV victimisation, rather than *perpetration* (see for example ABS, 2017; Boxall & Morgan, 2021).

In comparison, researchers have been less likely to analyse data collected from and about perpetrators of DFV. This is for various reasons, which we will explore throughout this chapter, including concerns about DFV perpetrators denying and minimising their use of violence, and difficulties associated with recruiting and engaging perpetrators of DFV in research. However, there are compelling reasons why we should conduct research on and with perpetrators of DFV. The first is conceptual in nature – by avoiding engaging with perpetrators in DFV research, we could be decentering perpetrators as both the cause and solution to DFV. As Flood and Demele (2021, p. 1) have argued, ‘It is time to reframe the problems of domestic and sexual violence in Australia: to put perpetrators in the picture’.

The second is practical in nature. Within criminological research, we have learned a lot about what works in reducing offending generally (e.g. Maruna, 2001), and DFV specifically (e.g. Boxall et al., 2022), through the analysis of perpetrator data. This information is particularly important when designing perpetrator intervention programmes. As a general principle, interventions should be informed by the views and needs of target cohorts, to ensure that they are relevant and appropriate. Put simply, we need to conduct perpetrator-focused research if we are to build the evidence base needed to prevent DFV.

Throughout this chapter, we use the term DFV perpetrators to refer to individuals who use DFV. Our focus is on male-to-female-perpetrated DFV, as this has been the primary focus of our collective research. Also, research and statistics demonstrate that women and girls are more likely to experience significant harms associated with DFV, including homelessness (AHURI, 2021), long-term impacts on mental health and well-being (Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2021), and serious injury and death (Boxall et al., 2022). This said, it is important that we acknowledge that all genders can perpetrate and experience DFV, and that gender diverse and LGB+ communities are disproportionately targeted and impacted by DFV (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022) and male-perpetrated violence more generally (Wolbers et al., 2022).

This chapter is informed by our decades of collective experience researching in this field. This includes undertaking qualitative and quantitative research with both victims-survivors and perpetrators of DFV, as well as with stakeholders involved in relevant policy decision-making processes and the delivery of key services to these cohorts. Much of this research has involved interviews and focus groups, large-scale surveys, the analysis of administrative datasets, and case studies. In particular, in

recent years, we have been involved in the administration of surveys to Australian samples of 5000–15,000 people, to collect information about the prevalence and nature of specific forms of DFV (e.g. intimate partner violence and child-to-parent abuse) within the community. This included research seeking to unpack and explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on DFV perpetrated against women. We have also been involved in evaluations of different responses to DFV perpetrators and victims-survivors, seeking to understand their impact and effectiveness, and how they can be improved. Other research projects we have been involved with have focused on understanding the role of economic insecurity on women's experiences of DFV, the nature and impact of DFV perpetrated by young people against family members, reviewing the impact of family violence legislation, advising on a range of legislative reforms, and describing factors associated with intimate partner femicide.

Although we are all Australia-based researchers, our research experiences are likely to be relevant to international readers as well. The research benefits, challenges, and barriers we identify are not specific to conducting DFV research in Australia. Before we proceed, we wish to broaden the scope somewhat of the initial intentions of this chapter. More specifically, we hope to challenge the reader to move beyond an explicit focus on methods which may involve direct engagement with perpetrators of DFV, that is, interviews and perpetrator surveys. While these methods are described here, we have also included information about other methods that do not involve direct engagement with DFV perpetrators, such as the secondary analysis of datasets produced by law enforcement and other agencies. These data sources can include rich detail about DFV perpetration.

Further, while this chapter explores each of the different data collection methods in turn, we note the value of triangulation and multi-methods research when seeking to build the evidence base on perpetration of DFV. Early research found that the internal validity of victim-survivor reports of victimisation appeared to be affected by social desirability whereas perpetrator accounts of use of DFV were not (Arias & Beach, 1987). More recent research has generated more nuanced findings, showing that while reporting of frequency may be accurate, reporting of severity may be less so (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000). It is therefore important to consider that, while men using DFV may not deny use of DFV per se, their accounts of such use of violence are often shaped by minimisation, denial and victim-blaming attitudes (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). Untangling this requires a nuanced, and often multi-phased approach to research.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

2.1 *Sampling/Recruitment of Perpetrators of DFV for Research Purposes*

An important stage in the research process is identifying the population from which to draw your sample. This will be guided by a number of considerations, primarily the research questions, as well as logistics. There can be significant barriers

associated with sampling perpetrators of DFV. In particular, due to the stigma and shame associated with the use of DFV (Loeffler et al., 2010), men are likely to be reluctant to self-identify as a perpetrator and, in turn, to proactively volunteer to participate in research on this topic. This is particularly the case for men whose abusive behaviours are ongoing, and/or do not identify that their behaviours are abusive in the first place. The recruitment of men who use DFV therefore remains a challenge for researchers interested in this topic.

Research on DFV perpetrators has typically focused on populations that may be more accessible through leveraging relationships with trusted gatekeepers – people and organisations who can assist researchers seeking to engage in research on this topic. This primarily involves the use of Men’s Behaviour Change Programs (MBCP), that is, programmes targeted at perpetrators of DFV which aim to reduce their likelihood of reoffending, through interventions such as group therapy, and other treatment populations, with gatekeepers being the administrators of these programmes and/or treatment counsellors. Alternatively, researchers have utilised criminal justice populations and administrative datasets (e.g. arrest records maintained by law enforcement agencies), where the consent of perpetrators may not be required in order to access de-identified data. The other significant benefit of using samples drawn from MBCP and criminal justice populations is that these individuals have already been identified as perpetrators of DFV, meaning that self-identification may be less of an issue. Having said this, even DFV perpetrators who have been reported or charged with an offence related to their abusive behaviours, and/or referred to an MBCP, may still deny, minimise, or excuse their use of violence (Henning & Holdford, 2006).

Research findings derived from MBCP and criminal justice populations provide invaluable insights into issues such as the characteristics of offenders and offences that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies, and risk factors associated with reoffending. However, as a researcher it is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with these samples. In particular, the vast majority of perpetrators of DFV will never be involved in a treatment programme and/or come to the attention of the police (ABS, 2017).

2.1.1 The Importance of Language When Recruiting Perpetrators of DFV for Research Purposes

The use of language is critical when capturing information about and describing men’s use of DFV. For example, stakeholders involved in delivering services to perpetrators of DFV have consistently advised us that referring to men using DFV as ‘perpetrators’, ‘abusers’, or even ‘offenders’ in recruitment materials and during data collection processes can close down communication and engagement opportunities, due to the stigma associated with such terms (Politoff et al., 2019). This is a particularly critical point to keep in mind, if you are conducting research that aims to better understand perpetrators’ use of DFV within the context of their holistic lived experiences. However, others have equally argued that the language

researchers use as part of recruitment and data collection processes should aim to hold men accountable for their use of violence, which requires naming the behaviours for what they are: violence and abuse (Flood & Dembele, 2021). These debates are particularly apparent for children and young people who use violence, primarily because of concerns about labelling young people as deviant, and the evidence that children and young people who use violence in the home are often also victims themselves (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022).

In line with Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming (1989), one of the ways researchers have attempted to resolve the conflict described above is by focusing on labelling the behaviour (e.g. use of DFV) as socially unacceptable, while valuing other aspects of a person (e.g. someone's capacity to be a valued parent, partner, family, or community member). For example, researchers may use terms like 'men who have used violence against their family members' in recruitment materials. As a general principle, researchers need to examine the context in which their research is being conducted, to ensure the use of the most appropriate language, when investigating the perpetration of DFV. This should ideally involve consulting with practitioners with relevant experience, during the research design process.

2.2 Reimbursement of DFV Perpetrators Who Participate in Research Processes

There has been some debate around the appropriateness of reimbursing perpetrators of DFV for participating in research. While reimbursement of research participants in social science research is a common way of acknowledging and demonstrating respect for participants' time and expertise when sharing their lived experiences (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2019), reimbursing perpetrators who discuss their use of DFV (or other offending behaviours) has been critiqued. This is particularly contested in projects when data are being simultaneously collected with victim-survivors who are being reimbursed for their time and sharing of expertise.

The decision of whether to reimburse men who use violence for participation in DFV-related research will likely be informed by the ideological standpoint of each individual researcher or research team, ethics committee, and potentially even by the parameters set by funding bodies. For example, we recently undertook two projects funded by different government agencies, which gave us very different directions about reimbursing DFV perpetrators for their involvement in research. On one project, a condition of funding was that participants were *not* reimbursed, while the other encouraged us to reimburse participants. These differences were attributable to the nature of the research (the first project involved a survey with a large number of respondents while the other involved in-depth interviews), as well as the political and ideological viewpoints of the government agencies. In particular, the second

project was funded by an agency whose role was partly to support the rehabilitation of perpetrators, while the first was funded by a law enforcement agency.

3 Data Collection

Much of the data previously collected in relation to DFV perpetrators has occurred in the context of MBCP evaluations (e.g. Karakurt et al., 2019). Few studies examine the prevalence of DFV perpetration in the general population (Fleming et al., 2015). Further, research on men's use of violence outside of MBCP programme evaluations remains scarce (Arias & Beach, 1987; Flood & Dembele, 2021). Considering that only a small proportion of men who use DFV will ever participate in an MBCP during their lifetime, this means that research conducted with these samples is unlikely to be representative of the broader population of men who use violence against their intimate partners and/or family members.

The selection of different methods of data collection tends to be informed by each research project's focus and overarching research questions. In the subsequent sections, we provide an overview of different data sources utilised in research with men using DFV, their suitability to answering different research questions, and their benefits and limitations in building the current evidence base. We also provide information about the strengths and limitations of each research method for conducting research on DFV perpetrators.

3.1 Surveys

Surveys are commonly used to capture the views or experiences of large populations (Bachman & Schutt, 2018). This may include the following: (i) national or global survey samples, to examine wider prevalence rates of the issue under examination (e.g. use of DFV; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2015); (ii) surveys with specific target populations, such as college students (Toplu-Demirtas & Fincham, 2022) or men accessing specific services (Davis & Padilla-Medina, 2021); or (iii) surveys with clinical samples, including men referred to MBCPs (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Hine et al., 2022).

Surveys may include a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, to capture a combination of quantitative prevalence data and additional qualitative context or experiences (Bachman & Schutt, 2018; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). This approach allows the survey to achieve breadth of understanding via quantitative data, and depth of understanding when combined with qualitative insights. Further, surveys on DFV perpetration tend to include validated measures, capturing the frequency, and severity of DFV. The most commonly used instrument remains the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Costa & Barros, 2016), which measures the extent of partners' use of in psychological and physical attacks on each other and their reasoning

when dealing with conflicts. Despite repeated criticism of the scale's inability to capture context of use or experiences of DFV (Ackerman, 2018), it remains a popular instrument in quantitative research.

Strengths and Limitations of Survey Research

Surveys offer a cost-effective data collection method, if self-administered by the target population (Bachman & Schutt, 2018). Self-administered surveys are commonly used in large-scale studies on attitudes, experiences, and/or use of DFV (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022; Fleming et al., 2015). Aside from being cost-effective, self-administration has been associated with greater likelihood of honest disclosure of otherwise socially undesirable behaviours (e.g. use of DFV); since self-administered surveys avoid direct interaction with a researcher or interviewer, the risk of social desirability bias in participants' self-reports is reduced (Krumpal, 2013). This has certainly been our recent experience. Several of us were involved in developing an online self-administered survey to 5000 young people aged 16–20 living in Australia (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). Participants were asked about their childhood experiences of family violence and child abuse, as well as their perpetration of violence against family members. We found that one in five respondents had used violence against family members, including siblings, parents, and grandparents. This demonstrates that survey respondents are willing to disclose their own use of violence and abuse against family members.

Surveys may also be administered by researchers, for example, in the context of justice system and programme interventions, including as part of MBCP evaluations. Here, researchers or programme staff may administer surveys individually with study participants (Hine et al., 2022; Krumpal, 2013). There are various reasons why surveys may be administered by researchers or programme providers, including the literacy levels of respondents, limited familiarity with technology, or language barriers in some study populations.

Survey research offers an opportunity to generate quantitative findings with large representative samples that allow researchers to draw inferences to the wider population (e.g. men using DFV). The quantitative nature of survey data also facilitates the use of statistical methods that can assist in identifying factors or characteristics that predict the likelihood of certain behaviours occurring (e.g. attitudes towards women and attachment 'type') and/or changing over time (Bachman & Schutt, 2018; Fleming et al., 2015). Surveys may also be used to identify prevalence rates of certain behaviours or attitudes, albeit with limitations (Ackerman, 2018). This information is useful for informing early intervention and other responses to prevent the occurrence and persistence of DFV. More generally, from our experience engaging with government and non-government agencies, surveys are often viewed as particularly compelling evidence that can be used to argue for policy change, because they often involve large sample sizes. For example, two surveys administered to a cumulative sample of 25,000 women in Australia during different stages of the COVID pandemic were cited in various government policy papers as evidence to support an increase in funding to DFV support services (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Boxall et al., 2020).

There are, however, recognised limitations of survey-based research. Survey research using quantitative instruments to estimate prevalence rates of DFV has been criticised for capturing *incidents* of DFV, rather than understanding the *context* in which experiences or use of DFV occurs (Stark, 2009). As a result, some survey research administered to community samples has generated results suggesting that women and men experience and use DFV at comparable rates (for a review, see Johnson, 2006). This is problematic as it can lead to the misrepresentation of the context within which male- and female-perpetrated DFV occurs, as well as the impact women's and men's use of violence may have (Ackerman, 2018). In particular, there is consistent evidence that women are more likely than men to use violence against intimate partners as a means of self-defence or in anticipation of expected abuse. As Kelly and Westmarland (2016, p. 125) have noted, unless survey instruments recognise the patterns and impact of violence, they fail to capture the gendered nature of DFV and continue to produce a 'false equality' of prevalence rates by gender.

Survey research with perpetrators of violence has also repeatedly been subject to investigations of the validity of self-reported use of DFV and other offending behaviour more broadly (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Krumpal, 2013). As discussed earlier in this section, the risk of social desirability bias (e.g. the under-reporting of socially undesirable behaviours and overreporting of socially desirable ones) must be considered in research with perpetrators of DFV. Although this can be minimised by using self-administered surveys (Krumpal, 2013), where surveys are administered by researchers, social desirability bias may affect results. Perpetrators of DFV may also be more likely to deny certain forms of DFV (e.g. sexual violence), minimise the severity of their use of violence and justify their use of certain abusive behaviours, such as by blaming their partner's behaviour for their use of DFV (e.g. Kelly & Westmarland, 2016).

From our experience, there are no guaranteed ways of preventing the influence of social desirability bias on research participants' self-reported use of DFV. However, one technique that we and other colleagues have used is structuring surveys so that respondents are asked about positive behaviours (e.g. participation in community activities), before asking them about negative behaviours (e.g. use of DFV). Further, if space allows, we ask respondents about their DFV victimisation experiences, as well as perpetration (see for example Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). The inclusion of these additional questions may encourage respondents to be truthful about their use of DFV, because we are providing them with an opportunity to present their holistic lived realities, instead of only focusing on their use of DFV. Finally, we remind participants prior to asking questions about use of DFV that all responses will be kept confidential and anonymous.

3.2 *Qualitative Interviews*

Like surveys, interviews are a commonly used data collection method when researching men's use of DFV. They may be used individually or in combination with other methods (e.g. quantitative surveys) (Meyer, 2017; Lilley-Walker, et al., 2018). Interviews are principally qualitative in nature, containing open-ended questions, although they may also contain some closed-ended questions including the collection of demographic information. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the aims and objectives of the interview and the broader research project (Bachman & Schutt, 2018).

Interviews are used to elicit in-depth information from research participants about their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. This may include time- or context-specific examinations of the use of violence or life-course narratives of research participants, to better understand experiences and patterns of behaviour over time. Interviews may be administered face-to-face, via phone, video call, or online video conferencing platforms. If the interview is conducted in-person, the interview setting requires careful consideration. Ideally, interviews should be conducted in a place that maximises participants' comfort and facilitates information-sharing. However, the setting must also ensure the researcher's safety, which needs to be demonstrated to any ethics committee. As such, none of us have ever conducted interviews in perpetrators' homes and instead have typically conducted interviews in public venues, on the premises of service providers, in an office setting, or via phone or video conference. To give participants some level of control over their engagement in research, where possible, we give them options for where or how the interview can be conducted.

Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews are a suitable tool for data collection if the aim is to capture in-depth information about participants' experiences and perceptions, and to better understand the situational and life context within which DFV occurs. In the context of DFV, qualitative interviews also offer an opportunity to unpack quantitative findings in greater detail. Some studies therefore employ mixed-methods, using quantitative methods to generate generalisable findings and qualitative methods to examine these findings in the context of participants' lived experiences (Hine et al., 2022; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Lilley-Walker et al., 2018). Semi- and unstructured interviews offer an opportunity for the researcher to be guided by the importance the research participants place on discussing certain experiences in greater detail. Further, they provide the researcher with an opportunity to prompt participants for further detail on topics that may emerge during a qualitative interview and thus allow some flexibility and ad hoc adjustments to the interview questions. It is worth bearing in mind when conceptualising a research project that researchers often commence the data collection process with some in-built biases or assumptions about what they are expecting to hear. However, we all have had experiences where the research participants' narratives have challenged these assumptions and encouraged us to pursue new lines of inquiry, thereby enriching our research findings.

There are time and cost barriers to conducting interviews, particularly with at-risk populations, such as DFV perpetrators, and children and young people who use violence. Qualitative interviews tend to be time-consuming and costly, due to the time involved in the data collection itself, transcription of audio-recorded data, data analysis, and synthesis. The length of interviews is entirely dependent on the research participant and how comfortable they are talking to you and how much they want to disclose. All of us have conducted interviews that run for hours, while others have run for 30 minutes or less (the latter scenario is much more likely from our experience). It is difficult to predict how long interviews will run for, although as part of the informed consent process you will typically provide participants with a general idea of the amount of time they will have to set aside to take part. However, all of us have been caught out on projects where we only allocated ourselves an hour for an interview and the participant has spoken for far longer. This can be stressful if you have other commitments and potentially lead to having to terminate the interview early which can be extremely detrimental for the quality of the data that you're collecting; when a research participant is speaking freely and openly, as a researcher you should avoid interrupting their 'flow'. As such, where possible we now try to allocate a few hours for each interview and not book other interviews or meetings that may clash.

Because interviews are time-consuming and resource-intensive, participant samples used for qualitative interview data collection are usually small (e.g. 5–20), compared to quantitative survey research. There are no established guidelines for researchers about minimum and maximum sample sizes when conducting qualitative interviews; if you are conducting an in-depth case study a sample size of one would be acceptable. The number of interviews you may aim to conduct is entirely dependent on your research questions, the population you're drawing from, logistics, and whether you are trying to generalise your findings to a broader population. For example, conducting interviews with perpetrators who speak languages other than English can be particularly time-consuming and expensive because of the costs associated with engaging interpreters.

As a general principle, rather than focusing on conducting a specific number of interviews, qualitative researchers typically aim to do enough interviews to reach 'saturation point'. Saturation is a difficult concept to define, but when a researcher says they have reached saturation, it typically means that they are not hearing anything 'new' from interviewees. More specifically, the researcher has identified all of the themes that they are likely to, and feel as though they have an in-depth understanding of these themes. This is not to suggest that researchers stop 'learning' from interview participants after a certain point. Certainly, from our collective experience every interview brings something new or interesting to our understanding of DFV perpetration. Rather, if we have reached saturation, we are not identifying new themes but are using new narratives to consolidate our understanding of themes that we have already described.

However, as qualitative interviews are generally designed to generate an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, this tends to overcome the limitations associated with generalisability, which is usually not an aim of qualitative research. While

qualitative interview findings allow in-depth insight into social phenomena (e.g. motivations for use of DFV), they usually do not lend themselves to drawing conclusions that are applicable to the wider population of interest (in this case, men using DFV). The findings therefore tend to be limited to the study-specific population and their unique characteristics (cf. Richards & Bartels, 2011).

Other limitations of qualitative interviews include the impact of social desirability and image management of men who use DFV on the validity of information disclosed during direct interaction with a researcher. While some research has found that participants are willing to disclose use of DFV during interviews (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Meyer, 2017), it also alerts us to limitations and social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013). For example, research comparing men's survey intake self-reports of use of DFV against police records finds that self-reported use of DFV at MBCP intake appears to align with official data/police records (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000). However, at the programme's exit, men's self-reported use of DFV was significantly underreported, compared to (ex-) partner reports of ongoing abuse (Heckert & Goldolf, 2000). This may suggest that self-reported use of DFV may be more reliable in relation to abusive behaviours that attracted formal interventions, but is less likely to reveal more nuanced abusive behaviours experienced by victim-survivors, which may not necessarily attract the attention of police or other formal interventions. It may also suggest that social desirability plays a greater role in interviews conducted post-interventions when behaviour change is expected.

Again, managing the impact of social desirability bias when conducting interviews with DFV perpetrators is difficult in practice. However, an important strategy that we have used across multiple projects is providing respondents with the option to select the gender of the researcher who will conduct the interview. This recognises that some men may be more comfortable disclosing their use of DFV to a male researcher, rather than a female one, potentially because of the assumption that men are more likely to condone these behaviours. This said, in practice, we have found that it is rare that a male perpetrator of DFV will actually ask for a male interviewer. Importantly, in the Australian context, Indigenous respondents may also be offered the opportunity to undertake their interview with an Indigenous interviewer, although some prefer to speak to non-Indigenous researchers, given the cultural shame associated with the issues and concerns about confidentiality being breached.

The primary implication of social desirability bias is that it may lead to respondents lying or downplaying or minimising their behaviours, meaning that the data are low in quality and accuracy. To promote open and honest sharing of information, researchers need to pay careful attention to not only who conducts the interview, but also where. Where possible, we avoid conducting interviews in places that are likely to be viewed negatively by respondents, including police stations, watch-houses, and prisons. Further, at the beginning of interviews we reiterate to respondents that we are not law enforcement officers and are instead researchers. We also describe to respondents how we will protect their anonymity, including not taking any identifying information or notes during interviews and destroying any recordings we take from interviews.

Because interviews are time-consuming, it is fairly standard for researchers to tape-record interviews. However, this can only be done with the consent of the participant. From our experience, it is very rare that someone will say no to having an interview tape-recorded, as long as you explain why you are recording it and how you will deal with the recordings once taken. As such, at the beginning of the interview we may ask to record the interview but reassure the participant that the recording will be destroyed later on and any identifying information removed. Further, in projects where we are collecting very sensitive information, we may ask respondents to use pseudonyms to refer to other people. For example, instead of referring to their partner by name, we might ask them to call them their partner or ‘ex’ if they have separated.

3.3 Criminal Justice Administrative Datasets

A common method used by researchers to examine men’s use of DFV is the secondary analysis of administrative datasets, in particular law enforcement records. Most police agencies collect a range of data about DFV perpetrators and victims-survivors (e.g. the sociodemographic characteristics and nature of relationship) and the characteristics of offences (e.g. date and location of offence, the use of a weapon). In Australia and other jurisdictions (e.g. the United Kingdom), police officers are also required to include information about any risk assessments that were conducted at time of attending a DFV call-out. The nature of the information collected varies significantly, depending on the type of risk assessment tool used and the breadth of items included. Typical items included in police risk assessment tools include the presence of factors associated with reoffending or lethal violence, such as the presence of sexual violence within the relationship between the identified primary perpetrator and the victim-survivor, nonfatal strangulation as well as prior offending (Dowling & Morgan, 2019).

Primarily, when researchers use administrative datasets provided by law enforcement, they focus on quantitative datasets that are generated through police internal case record systems. These datasets are particularly helpful for answering research questions about the (re)offending patterns of DFV perpetrators that are reported to the police, including the temporal dimensions of (re)offending. Recent research conducted in Australia using police arrest records found that DFV reoffending risk ‘peaks’ within the first 3 months of the first offence and then declines afterwards (Morgan et al. 2018). However, a less often utilised – but extremely valuable – data sources are the free-text narratives and comments that are recorded by responding police officers in relation to specific incidents of DFV. Depending on the jurisdiction and law enforcement agency, the detail provided in these narratives can provide valuable information about the nature of incidents, including the context within which the incident occurred, as well as police decision-making. For example, in one project conducted in Australia, researchers used police narratives to develop a crime script of intimate partner violence (Boxall et al., 2018). In another study, police

narratives were used to understand the conditions under which domestic violence protection orders were breached (Napier et al., 2015). As such, when considering the use of law enforcement administrative datasets in research exploring DFV, consideration should also be given to the availability and benefits of analysing *qualitative* information recorded by law enforcement. Other forms of criminal justice administrative data that can provide valuable information about DFV perpetrators and offending include sentencing remarks, coronial records (see for example Boxall et al., 2022; Whittle & Hall, 2018), and corrections information.

Strengths and Limitations of Criminal Justice Administrative Datasets

A core limitation of criminal justice administrative datasets is that they only provide information about DFV offences (and perpetrators) that come to the attention of the police. There are a number of reasons why victims-survivors may not report experiences of DFV to the police. This includes structural barriers, like being financially dependent on the perpetrator (Morgan et al., 2022), being concerned about being misidentified as a primary perpetrator of violence and abuse and/or having shared children removed from their care (Reeves, 2021). Emotional factors may also act as barriers to reporting, including internalised stigma and shame and attachment to the abuser (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2021). It is for this reason that DFV reported to the police is referred to as the ‘tip of the iceberg’, although currently there is no clear understanding of what proportion of DFV is reported to the police.

Further, like surveys criminal justice datasets are focused on ‘incidents’ of DFV rather than patterns of abusive behaviours that may have occurred over time. This stands in contrast to the significant body of research by Stark (2009) and others on coercive control, and the importance of conceptualising intimate partner violence as a pattern of abusive behaviours that are interrelated and cumulative over time. Finally, definitions of DFV used by researchers may be limited by the relevant legislation for the jurisdiction where the data have been obtained. Legislation is often out of step with current contemporary definitions of DFV, typically focusing on physical forms of abuse and violence, and discrete forms of non-physical abusive behaviours (e.g. stalking and threats to kill). This can exclude forms of DFV that have emerged more recently (e.g. technology-facilitated forms of abuse) and complex forms of emotional abuse (e.g. coercive control).

However, there are also a number of strengths associated with criminal justice administrative datasets that still make them a useful source of information. First, these datasets are populated by the police and other criminal justice agency representatives who are tasked with determining the statement of facts associated with the case. This means that the narratives provided by DFV perpetrators, and victims-survivors are not taken at face value but are interrogated closely and different sources of information triangulated to develop a view of what occurred (Boxall et al., 2022). Having said this, criminal justice representatives are still people and are influenced by the same biases as other members of the public. Perhaps even more so, considering evidence which suggests that police agencies endorse and legitimise hegemonic masculine ideologies (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022).

3.4 Surveys, Focus Groups, and Interviews with Service Providers and Practitioners

Finally, criminological, social work, law, and sociological research conducted with those working at different points of the system can also provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of system responses to men who use DFV, the ways in which perpetrators are responded to at different points of the service and justice system, as well as professional views on offending behaviours, trajectories, and risk. These engagements can be conducted via surveys, focus groups, and interviews, depending on the scale and scope of the research.

In the context of building the much-needed evidence base of ‘what works’ in engaging men who use DFV in behaviour change, interviews with MBCP practitioners have proved a valuable source of information. Given their close contact with, and professional understanding of working with men over the course of delivering a MBCP, research with men’s service practitioners has contributed new understandings on programme delivery, perpetrator engagement, and the different trajectories of court-mandated and non-mandated men who engage in behaviour change programmes (see, e.g. Meyer et al., 2020).

Given the well-established barriers to accessing and engaging men who use violence in research, several of which have been described here, research undertaken with those working within the system can also provide understandings that may otherwise be absent from projects. Take, for example, research undertaken during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic where Australian DFV scholars sought to document the impact that the pandemic, including stay-at-home restrictions, may have on the perpetration of DFV. Emerging research demonstrated the value of utilising practitioner professional insights during this period to understand changes in perpetration of DFV, including the emergence of new forms of abuse (see, *inter alia*, Pfitzner et al., 2020).

Strengths and Limitations of Research with Practitioners

A positive benefit associated with engaging with practitioners and stakeholders is that because they are typically being asked to comment on their experiences generally engaging with DFV perpetrators, they are well placed to comment on patterns and outliers. However, the associated limitation is that it can be difficult to determine what the practitioner’s unit of analysis is. In particular, how do we account for and compare the patterns described by a practitioner with 30 years plus experience who may have engaged with hundreds of perpetrators, with a practitioner who is less experienced.

There are also fewer ethical considerations associated with engaging with stakeholders, because we are unlikely to receive disclosures of violence and abuse that we may need to report to the police. Further, the risk to researchers is lower when engaging with stakeholders as opposed to offenders, as is the risk of retraumatising or distressing research participants.

4 Key Lessons from the Field

4.1 Collusion

Much has been written about the risk of collusion with perpetrators of DFV in different practice settings, including family law and MBCPs (Morrison et al., 2017). However, there is a paucity of research on avoiding collusion among researchers who collect data from men who use DFV. Some research has highlighted lessons learned from data collection with perpetrators of DFV, but these lessons are predominantly focused on understanding denial and minimisation among perpetrators of violence, rather than understanding and avoiding collusion during data collection (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016).

Kelly and Westmarland's (2016) argument builds on earlier research, which alerted researchers to the tendency of perpetrators to 'incidentalise' self-reported use of violence to minimise severity (Hearn, 1998). This may include portrayals of their use of violence as a one-off occurrence, out of character, behaviours displayed under distress, in response to allegedly triggering behaviours engaged in by their (ex-)partner (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). Observations of minimisation and denial raise the question of whether researchers collecting data from men using DFV should point out participants' strategies of denial and minimisation to them, during data collection processes. While some researchers may have relevant training to do so (e.g. social work or clinical psychology qualifications), this cannot be assumed for researchers examining DFV who may come from a variety of disciplines, including criminology, health sciences, law, and education. At the very minimum, it is recommended that researchers collecting data with men who use DFV have a strong understanding of the nature, extent, and complexity of DFV, so they are able to identify instances where research participants may be incidentalising a behaviour that is part of a broader pattern of behaviour and avoid collusion during the course of an interview.

We have written above about the issues that may arise when perpetrators minimise their use of violence and the risk of researchers becoming complicit in this. At the other end of the spectrum are perpetrators who are overly remorseful about their actions, where this may in fact be a form of manipulation. It can at times be difficult to distinguish between a perpetrator's legitimate redemption script and desire to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001), including a professed desire to assist researchers in combating violence against women from the perspective of a reformed perpetrator, and their desire to develop a relationship with the researcher that goes beyond that of the research project. This may be a particular risk among female researchers, which many DFV researchers are (including the authors of this chapter), in particular when the research takes place in a prison setting, where the perpetrator may have limited opportunities for contact with women generally. In this context, it is important to recognise that some aspects of the behaviour that might otherwise be associated with desistance, including generativity, may also show overlap with the honeymoon phase of the cycle of abuse. Researchers should exercise caution, when

presented with highly performative displays of contrition and even disgust. Researchers should trust their instincts and, if necessary, seek guidance from professionals who have expertise in working with perpetrators of DFV.

4.2 *Vicarious Trauma*

There is increasing recognition generally of the emotional toll that criminological research can have on researchers (e.g. Waters et al., 2020). This may be intensified in relation to DFV research, which often entails detailed descriptions of violence in intimate settings, violence against children, and, as described above, minimisation by perpetrators. There is fortunately also an increasing recognition of the need for self-care measures to limit the impact of undertaking research of this nature. Some strategies that we and colleagues have employed include the following: (i) leaving computers and files at work; (ii) using a different phone number for work and personal purposes; (iii) limiting the number of cases read and/or coded per day; (iv) debriefing with other project members and colleagues experienced in work of this nature; (v) debriefing with a specialist counsellor; (vi) using meditation and mindfulness techniques to disconnect from work; (vii) taking regular breaks from work to recharge, including connecting with nature; and (viii) maintaining good health generally (e.g. physical exercise and nutrition, limiting alcohol consumption). The risk of vicarious trauma also raises critical implications for universities to ensure staff health and safety.

Collectively, we have worked on DFV issues for many decades. We have found these techniques to be vital for maintaining a degree of well-being, when dealing with stories and statistics involving extreme trauma, while remaining hopeful about the potential for healing, behaviour change, and the prevention of DFV.

5 Conclusion

There is increasing recognition across Australia and internationally that if we, as researchers, are to build the evidence base needed to prevent the occurrence and recurrence of DFV, then we must significantly increase evidence-based understandings of men who use DFV. As such, and while we do not underestimate the significant value of research which centres the experience and expertise of victim-survivors, this chapter has sought to demonstrate the different ways in which research can be undertaken with men who use DFV, and the strengths and limitations of each of these.

While research on sensitive and socially controversial behaviours and attitudes may be prone to minimisation or denial of offending behaviour along with other limitations outlined in this chapter, self-reported offending data form a critical data source in criminological research more broadly and in DFV research specifically

(Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). It allows researchers to understand the lived experience of those using DFV, which is critical to informing primary prevention strategies and interventions that assist behaviour change.

It is noteworthy that wider reviews of research reveal ongoing methodological issues in the administration of research with men using violence. While surveys and interviews are a common mode of data collection in research with men using DFV, particularly evaluation research, there are various strengths and benefits associated with the collection of data from secondary sources such as victim-survivors and practitioners and stakeholders who have contact with men who use DFV. Further, the secondary analysis of criminal justice administrative datasets can provide valuable insights into different dimensions of DFV perpetrator behaviours, including the context within which it occurs, and patterns of offending and reoffending (Lilley-Walker et al., 2018).

Many of these issues that we have considered within this chapter are relevant for research with other offender populations (e.g. women who use violence against men) while others are unique to engaging men in research around their use of DFV. In all our research, we have acknowledged the gendered nature of violence against women and adopted a gendered lens to the analysis and interpretation of data, both qualitative and quantitative. This approach applies regardless of the specific research method adopted, as does the need to ensure as researchers we adopt ethical approaches to research and self-care practices to ensure delivery of the highest quality of work.

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Chapter 23

Protecting Them, Protecting You: Tips and Cautions When Doing Research in Sexual Offending



Nereida Bueno-Guerra 

1 Sexual Offending as a Research Topic

Sexual assault, both against children and adults, is considered an epidemic by the United Nations (cited in Horvath & Brown, 2022). However, this type of crime is not nearly the most prevalent group in prisons. For instance, in Spain, the top-five prison population by crime according to the National Incarceration System (IIPP, 2022) is as follows: robbery (16k), drugs (6,6k), gender-based violence (4,4k), sexual assault (3,7k), and murder (3,1k). By contrast, sexual assault is one of the crimes that causes most pervading long-lasting and devastating effects on survivors (in children, e.g., Horner, 2010; in adults, e.g., Mason & Lodrick, 2013). It also impacts nations' economy, since the "global costs resulting from physical, psychological and sexual violence, can be as high as 8% of global GDP" (Perezniето et al., 2014, p.3), considering only sexual violence against children. That is why people who have committed sex offenses attract much of the research attention, specifically addressed to prevention, such as elaborating intervention programs in prisons; monitoring reinsertion as parole agents; teaching public about crime prevention or profiling potential subgroups characteristics for police and academic investigation. This might be also the case partly due to the assumption that this crime is committed by a specific group with common characteristics, as it seems indeed to be the case (Herrero, 2018).

Therefore, as a researcher, you might be interested in investigating people who have committed sexual offenses at some point in your career. Usually, this research may happen at prisons, social integration centers, parole offices, police stations, courtrooms, and university hospitals or departments. For example, in my case I was aware that the Spanish psychological treatment delivered at prisons was the same

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for those who sexually abused children and adults. Hence, I became interested in knowing whether their sociodemographic (i.e., age, gender, cultural level), autobiographical (i.e., exposure to violence, child maltreatment), and psychological characteristics (i.e., cognitive distortions, sexual fantasies) were so similar that would justify receiving the same treatment or on the other hand could be so different that being in separate groups would be advisable (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2023a, in press). That is why I applied for a grant and since 2019 I lead a regional project entitled “A comprehensive approach to child sexual abuse: toward specific prison treatments through interviewing victims and those who offend” in which, together with my team, we have already interviewed more than 70 inmates (serving sentences of child and adult sexual abuse, the two main comparative groups, and a group of inmates with non-sexual crimes, the control group), in addition to 12 victims of child sexual abuse.

This research has been held in four prisons, in the case of the inmates, collecting data across two different days per inmate, namely, 6 hours,¹ and in my university office, in the case of victims, in single-day interviews of 2–3 hours.² This means that currently I have accumulated around 450 hours of interviews. Moreover, I became interested in collaborating in preventing crimes against children and that is why I also participate in the H2020 European Project RAYUELA, aimed at developing a realistic video game to educate children about how to cope with potential cyber-victimization, among which there is online grooming, a type of sexual offending that takes place through Internet. In this project, I lead one working package and one of my duties is to analyze court sentences and interview face-to-face those who committed those crimes with the aim to extract profiles and better understand how to protect children online (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al., 2023b). In this case, the research is conducted both in social integration centers (for those offenders who were already on parole) and in prisons (for those who were still imprisoned).

It is also relevant to know that, since sexual violence is a matter of public health, it sometimes arises political, mass media, and public discrepancies (e.g., Mancini, 2018). Indeed, despite showing one of the most promising low rates of recidivism, people with sex offenses are the type of criminals most disowned by society (e.g., Cubellis et al., 2019). This stigma is worsened if the victims were children (e.g., Bueno-Guerra, 2020) and/or the subject suffered from pedophilia (e.g., Jahnke et al., 2015a). Furthermore, even practitioners and health care or social sciences undergraduates may also reject this type of client (Jahnke et al., 2015b; Walker et al., 2022), so mentioning you do research on this topic may create waves even between colleagues, sometimes because of prejudices, but also because sexual assault involves topics such as intimacy, violence, and occasionally personal experiences or ethical dilemmas (Lowe & Willis, 2020). For these reasons, doing research in sexual offending entails taking care of both the target of the research, with the

¹Below you can see some tips to apply for permission to national authorities.

²Below you can see some tips about how to disseminate results trying to reconcile empathy, respect and objective information.

responsibility of respecting their human rights and doing ethical research, and the researchers themselves, with the responsibility of prevailing self-care over research purposes. That is why this chapter pursues to equip the reader with the most useful advice to achieve so.

All this research experience has implied, among other things, struggling with different doubts and mistakes; coping with post-interview feelings or facing how to use the adequate words to refer to the perpetrators, so I will try through this chapter to provide the best advice I had wished to receive prior starting this topic of research. However, this text might not be the most complete guide available: I might have unintentionally omitted relevant information. In case you have further doubts after reading this chapter, my recommendation is following two rules: asking experienced colleagues or, in case there is none available at hand, guide yourself by the principles of Science and Ethics. You may not always end up achieving the answer, but at least your methods in trying so will be thoughtful, transparent, and respectful with Human Rights.

2 Three About-to-Start Issues

2.1 Ask Yourself Why This Topic

Perhaps the first and foremost question that you should pose to yourself before doing research on sexual assault is why you decided to approach this topic. Some of the reasons might be fighting against crime; helping others or getting to understand this issue in depth. However, look honestly at yourself and kindly search for your ultimate motive. Sometimes, victims of past sexual violence are eager to protect others from the harm they suffered and devote to advocacy or sex crime research, as a study on volunteers' motivation shows (Young et al., 2019, p.7: "*Being a survivor of a crime and having to figure out the system made me want to strive to provide services that I did not have access to*"). However, doing so without prior mental health assessment, training or therapy might become counterproductive and might contribute to re-victimization and elicit secondary traumatic stress (Benuto et al., 2018). Therefore, if your background includes some form of sexual violence, be cautious and do protect yourself before engaging in this form of research.

Also, it might be that you were not object of past sexual violence but a proxy was somehow involved in this type of crime (e.g., some of your beloved ones was victimized/was incarcerated for committing sexual crimes). In this case, your prior contact with the topic might interfere with the way you produce hypotheses or assess evidence, since moral and social values do impact our way of doing science (Colombo et al., 2016). Therefore, remember that researchers should try their best to avoid biased accommodative-only hypotheses (Lipton, 2005). Then, try to honestly and kindly look at yourself and ask whether you try to confirm some fact about sexual violence when doing research (i.e., people committing sexual offenses should

be punished with death/should not be punished because there are external factors that account better for their responsibility). As a partial solution, team yourself with other researchers with opposing perspectives or invite them for discussion on your results. The more feedback you obtain and include, the more solid and value-free evidence you will produce.

2.2 Know the Myths and Fight Against Them

As researchers, we should be aware of the myths and folk knowledge surrounding our topic, either to educate on real evidence or to not fall into the trap and bias our own designs and interpretations of results. This is of special relevance in the research field of sexual offending (indeed, see a recent book about evidence-based response to myths and misconceptions in this topic edited by Lussier et al., 2020), because some crime policy proposals and much media coverage usually focus on the harshest but still lowest prevalent sexual crimes, contributing to the dissemination and establishment of myths about different topics such as sex offender treatment efficacy (Quinn et al., 2004), nationality of the perpetrator, history of prior sexual victimization or recidivism (Fortney et al., 2007, see Table 3, p.9), to name a few. Therefore, it is very helpful to dedicate some time to become updated to the latest evidence and to know the data of the region of interest (i.e., checking the prison national database; looking for the latest report on sexual victimization) as well as the latest research tendencies (i.e., checking the latest issues in specialized journals to find out their topics of interest, i.e., online grooming) and recently published meta-analyses.

Note also that it is very likely to receive rooted opinions and dichotomic perspectives from lay people in case you informally unveil your topic of research (i.e., “Those who sexually offend can never change, so psychological treatment is useless with them” vs. “Those who sexually offend deserve psychological treatment”). In those cases, confrontation, even when data is by your side, is not very recommended because it might be seen as non-empathic, impolite and will rarely help in changing others’ mind. Bear in mind that sexual offending wakes strong emotions up. Plus, you may not know your speakers’ personal background, namely, whether they have been affected by sexual violence or whether they have committed a sexual offense or are attracted to minors. Therefore, some advice is to let controversial issues out of the discussion; clearly state your firm position about crime prevention and ethic research, and, if any, kindly educate through sharing some paradoxical reasoning to help lay people think about the topic as a research area of interest later (i.e., How is it possible to state that most of the people who committed sex offenses were sexually abused as a child if it is girls the most prevalent victim group? It is curious, isn’t it?) or provide some data for potential help-seekers (i.e., This is interesting: there are some initiatives to help victims of sexual violence/people with pedophilia to find

psychological assistance, such as [say the name of the regional place of reference],³ but people are usually unaware of that). By doing any of these two options, you will be contributing with science dissemination, demystifying wrong data, and avoiding tense situations.

2.3 Use Appropriate Terms

It is of the utmost importance using appropriate terms when doing research on sexual offending for several reasons. First, to find academic information adjusted to your needs, since inadequate words may condition your search into academic or statistics databases. This entails getting to know the concrete keywords and spellings that other researchers use, which in the field of sexual offending may vary depending on the country (i.e., paedophilia in UK English and pedophilia in US English), the data ranges of your search (i.e., during the 70s until the 90s the term “rapist” was mostly used in academic research to refer to those who have committed sexual offenses against adults), and the different adopted international terms (i.e., recent reports differentiate between contact and non-contact sexual abuse) (e.g., Office for National Statistics, 2020, United Kingdom), whereas other reports employ the terms child sexual abuse and online grooming, respectively (ANAR, 2020, Spain, see p.6 for terminology disclosure).

A second relevant reason to use appropriate terms is to contribute to educating society and avoid stigmatization. Researchers carry the responsibility of carefully measuring their words and highlighting any nuances in their research activities, teaching, mass-media interviews, or dissemination activities, because their opinion is endowed with authority. Note that the difference between using labels and person-first language⁴ is the ability to make your audience more understanding (e.g., by becoming interested in volunteering with some traditionally marginalized group, Lowe & Willis, 2020); to support public policies addressed to provide clinical help that can eventually contribute to crime prevention (Harris & Socia, 2016); or to humanize this population (Harper et al., 2022). Indeed, mass-media often

³Some free online resources for victims of sexual violence seeking help are as follows: Rape Crisis Network Europe (<https://www.rcne.com/contact/countries/>), Enough Abuse Campaign (<https://enoughabuse.org/get-help/survivor-support/>). Some free online resources for people with pedophilia seeking help are as follows: Help Wanted (<https://www.helpwantedprevention.org/>), Troubled Desire (<https://www.troubled-desire.com/es/>), Stop it Now (<https://www.stopitnow.org/>). For victims, people with pedophilia and organizations interested in developing workshops about prevention of sexual abuse, the ECSA Project provides a worldwide data basis listing related entities and projects by nation (<https://ecsa.lucyfaithfull.org/interventions>).

⁴“Person-first” language refers to the recommendation to name individuals using the syntagma “person who” plus the action committed or “person with” plus the diagnosis or consequences of a criminal act rather than using an adjective or the action committed alone. Some examples may be: say “person who commits sexual offences” rather than “sexual offender” or “person with pedophilia” rather than “pedophile.”

misuse terms in the field of sexual offending (e.g., taken pedophile and sexual offender as synonymous) and this has traditionally made people with pedophilia who has never acted upon children as recipients of social rejection and violence (Jahnke et al., 2015a; Tewksbury, 2012), which hinders their call for help to avoid offending in the future (Gómez-Durán et al., 2019; Bueno-Guerra, 2020).

The third reason to use adequate terms in research about sexual offending is to comply with the latest consensus in academic writing in the field. Researchers should be updated and aware of them because otherwise they can see their opportunities to publish in relevant journals jeopardized. Indeed, some of the most cited scientific journals about sexual offending include in their guidelines explicit references on how to address individuals who have committed sexual offenses. See this example of a journals' editorial (Seto, 2018a):

Authors are encouraged to be thoughtful about the connotations of language used in their manuscripts to describe persons or groups. Person-first language (e.g., “persons with sexual offense histories”, “individual who has been adjudicated for...”, “child/adolescent with sexual behavior problems”) is generally preferred because it is often more accurate and less pejorative than terms like “sex offender”. Terms like “sex offender” imply an ongoing tendency to commit sex offenses, which is inaccurate for many persons who have been convicted for sex offenses given current sexual recidivism base rates. Similarly, the term suggests a homogeneous group defined and stigmatized on the basis of criminal behaviors that may have taken place infrequently or many years in the past. Person-first language is also consistent with APA style guidelines for reducing bias in written language (see American Psychological Association).

Therefore, some worth reading documents are the “APA Guidelines for bias-free language” (APA, 2020) plus the “Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse” (Interagency Working Group, 2016, especially pp. 83–90); although the interested researcher should also address to specific research conducted on this topic (e.g., Tran et al., 2018, see Table 1, p.3; Cox, 2020) as well as the specific guidelines published by international reputed organizations in the field (e.g., “Terms and phrases relating to child sexual abuse” by the Independent Inquiry into sexual Abuse, “Glossary of Terms” by the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children).⁵ For example, there you can learn that “child sexual abusive material” is a much-preferred idiom than “child pornography,” since pornography is an industry where consensual individuals decide to make sex for money and children cannot give consent; or that this

⁵There are a variety of glossaries available, produced by different institutions. For instance, one may refer to the “Terms and phrases relating to child sexual abuse” document published by the Independent Inquiry into Sexual Abuse (IICSA), which is accessible at <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/1412/view/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-iicsa-vs-cp-terms-phrases.pdf> (last accessed on January 2, 2022), or the “Glossary of Terms” provided by the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), which is available at <https://www.icmec.org/resources/glossary/> (last accessed on January 2, 2022). The ICMEC glossary also provides links to additional terminology resources. Furthermore, the ICMEC stresses the significance of using proper vocabulary, as demonstrated by a quote from one of their board directors: “In the fight against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children, terminology is not just a matter of semantics; it determines the efficacy of response”.

abusive material can be classified into different categories according to the COPINE scale (see Taylor & Quayle, 2005). Importantly, despite being official, these terms might not always be welcomed by people during interviews (for example, see Jahnke, Blagden, and Hill (2022) or B4U-ACT (2020) for differences between “pedophile” and “minor attracted person” when subjects with pedophilia refer to themselves).

Finally, try to adhere as objectively as possible to data when you are collecting or reporting information, avoiding interpreting or retelling the data. For instance, sexual offending research is of special relevance to avoid consensualizing and pornifying patterns of writing.⁶ Consensualizing patterns refer to report sexual offending narratives with actors reversed so that the perpetrator is not well identified (e.g., using “she performed oral sex on him” rather than “the offender pushed her head onto his groin, forcing penis into her mouth” (Campbell, 2022, p. 16)) or using sex vocabulary, which assumes consent between the subjects, so that the narrative is recast as a consensual activity simply due to the word choice (e.g., “they had sex” seems consensual rather than “she suffered a sexual assault” (Campbell, 2022, p.16). Pornifying patterns refers to the use of keywords that are frequent in porn sites and therefore possess potential arousal force, rather than employing formal and objective wording, such as writing “cum” instead of “ejaculation” or “gang bang” instead of “group sexual assault” (Campbell, 2022, p. 18).

3 Let’s Start Research: Phases of Fieldwork

3.1 *Getting Access to the Sample*

Since your population of study will be usually in contact with the judicial or prison system, it is possible that you need to be granted permission to get access to interview them.⁷ These permissions can vary in each country as it may depend on some factors, such as the number of applications you need to pass through, the waiting time for an official response and whether you are requesting face-to-face interviews or not. For instance, to get access to locate and read court room sentences about child sexual abuse and human trafficking, while in Belgium this can only be done in a predetermined place for a limited amount of time, thus forcing researchers in that region to rush in in their readings and data collection, in Spain it is possible to be done online, checking anonymous sentences as much time as needed in the comfort of our office.

With regard to prisons, in Spain there is a standardized application form in which the researchers must detail their objectives, methods, and population and submit it to an online inbox addressed for this specific purpose. The official response can take

⁶The following definitions and examples are extracted from Campbell, 2022.

⁷For example, when your study population is serving a sentence.

between 2 and 6 months, so taking this time into consideration is relevant in case you are applying for some funding, or you have only a specific time in the year during which you can perform the study. Moreover, asking for the appropriate population in the application form is decisive, and the researcher will benefit from knowing how the penitentiary system of the region of study is established, since there are some prisons that only hold inmates in custody or that are preferential for certain types of offenses, such as, precisely, sexual offenses. If the researcher is not aware of this classification system, then the application form will be poorly detailed and even though the access can be granted, the team may discover that the population they need for their study is not present in the prison they are visiting.

Once the permission is granted, the research leader needs to contact the heads of each prison allowed to visit, because each prison may have their own specific protocols and timetables (e.g., on Thursdays the prison staff may be meeting to discuss about permissions, so nor the inmates will be willing to participate in any activity as they will be impatiently expecting for a decision about their freedom, nor the staff members will be available in case you many need any operational help). So, it is always a good idea to write an email to the head of the prison to introduce yourself and the aims of the study you are conducting and to arrange some appointment. This appointment is crucial for the heads because their daily routine in the center will be likely affected during the time of your study, and they need to know your exact needs. In these appointments, heads will appreciate if you already know how their prisons work; you are aware of their common difficulties (e.g., if you ask to interview the inmates at some specific module, there is usually the need for a prison officer to supervise the transfer of the inmate from one module to another and this implies assigning some extra task to some staff member) and whether you are able to already provide them with solutions. For instance, I propose to run the interviews in modules where interfering daily activities is difficult, such as sociocultural modules or classrooms; I also propose to know beforehand the module where each inmate I was allowed to interview was settled, since it might happen that the prison officer who would call the inmate is new or is rotating and does not know the inmate personally, so he or she may need to call each module one to one to locate the subject. Therefore, time is saved if you can provide the number of the module.

Moreover, heads will be interested in knowing whether you have an expectation of the time that each interview may take and will need to be sure that this period of time does not collide with their schedule. Therefore, if you already know the most common scheduled activities in the prison, such as breakfast, lunch time, or prisoner count you can already propose some concrete period of time for your arrival, data collection, and leave. Also, heads will need to know whether you are interviewing subjects with high risk of violence so that the prison needs to reorganize guard turns to keep an eye on the room you will be assigned to. Of course, you will be getting all this information throughout experience, so do not panic if you are novel: just try to be receptive to all this information; detect which details are relevant to those who let you conduct your research and be proactive in thinking of flexible solutions to ease their and your task. Importantly, I also recommend to state clearly in this meeting which information you can and cannot disclose with the center after

conducting your study to avoid any further misunderstanding (e.g., imagine that at the end of your study the head of the center asks you for a report about some inmate you interviewed, but in your consent form it is explicit that all the information collected will be confidential).

Finally, in these meetings, remember to ask about the items that you are allowed to enter inside the prison because depending on the level of the prison security, these items may vary. For instance, digital devices, such as smartwatches, smartphones, or laptops, may not be allowed, so data collection should be done with paper and pen and therefore having a data sheet template in advanced is useful, whereas voice recorders may be an exception for some centers and, in those cases, you may not need to write everything down. Also, some items that may seem innocuous, such as clips, staples, or non-transparent bottles of water may be prohibited for security reasons. This is very relevant to know in advance for your planification.

Once you agree with the head of the prison on the days of your visits, it is always welcomed that you maintain a good relationship with the guards and the staff members. Note that they will be the people you will be in contact with each day and that you depend on their collaboration to find each inmate, to get the room available, and so on. Treat them as you would like to be treated; remember that you can also learn from them because despite they are not researchers, they have daily experience with the inmates and can provide useful information, and ask them what the best way for them is to work with you, so that each part can do their work comfortably. For example, I had the feeling that some guard at a prison was not comfortable with my team and I asked him why. I found out that we were arriving at the prison just on the unique 30 minutes he had for breakfast. Thus, I agreed with him to arrive later each day and leave later as well, so that he could enjoy his breakfast and I could not lose time for the interviews, and since that simple conversation the social interaction improved. Sometimes, the devil is in the details.

Finally, some days before you expect to finish the study, my advice is to arrange a new appointment with the head of the prison and provide feedback about your experience. This does not mean to disclose the data you have collected, but to thank their collaboration and, if needed, share some useful information with them (e.g., X person was especially kind with us; the door in X room does not close properly or, only if the consent form allows you to do so, you can also share some relevant information about some subjects of your study that may be useful for the prison, etc.). You may encounter this staff in further studies so having established good relationships with them will foster collaboration.

3.2 Piloting the Interview

Despite your research experience, any new project deserves some previous piloting, because the context of the interview (both social and physical), the characteristics of the sample, and how the items of the questionnaire/interview are interpreted may vary from one study to the next.

This is especially relevant in sexual offending if some case is receiving great attention from the media, since it can easily raise confrontation or misinterpretation between the researcher and the participant. It is also relevant for the planned duration of each session: for instance, you may find that some concrete question arouses interest and takes longer to be responded to than expected. I found that some items of a questionnaire about cognitive distortions took almost half an hour to be responded by some inmates with pedophilia because they wanted to deepen about their feelings, as they rarely had the chance. Thus, piloting the interview will make you lose a couple of participants but it will give you an eagle view of the whole data collection plan; enhance your ability to plan the time for the sessions accordingly; empower you with confidence and, ultimately, it will minimize the risk to lose data. In case the piloting is not possible, you may want to pass your interview or questionnaire plan to some colleague to request their feedback. I myself did that in an investigation with adult survivors of child sex abuse (Tames and Bueno, submitted) and it was very useful because the formulation of some questions was found by my colleague as potentially re-victimizing, so I had the opportunity to rephrase them before causing any harm to the participants.

3.3 *Collecting Data*

Apart from having a solid design, data collection can be influenced by many other factors. Here, I will develop three. First, the configuration of the sample is crucial in sexual offending research: when the data are collected at a group (i.e., you interview several subjects at a time within a focus group), people with some types of sexual offending should not coincide at the same time. Second, although not likely, the participant may exhibit paranoid thoughts because of the forensic situation they live in, and third, they may sexualize the interview, because of the nature of their crime and the type of questions you may pose. Next, I provide tips to counteract these three factors.

With regard to the sample, in case you are planning to collect data from a group of people, you must decide the most adequate composition of the group thinking ahead the potential consequences derived from your research, such as whether having participants with different types of crimes is risky in terms of criminal learning. For example, having hands-on and hands-off sexual offenders in the same group is counter-productive, because hands-off inmates may learn strategies to approach victims from hands-on offenders' responses (Herrero, 2018). Remember that this might be a risk to disclose or a prevention to take in your document addressed to the Ethical Committee.

With regard to incarcerated participants, on the one hand, it is relevant to assess their initial attitude. In the best case, they will experience the research session as a free space within their restrictive context where they can express their ideas without the fear of being judged. However, in the worst case, they will show paranoid thought (e.g., "Why was I chosen for this research? Does this mean that someone in

the center is assessing my clinical history?”), even more if their case is receiving a lot of attention from the media. If that happens, try to put in their shoes: after the data collection, you, an unknown person using formal vocabulary they are not familiar with (e.g., questionnaire, analysis, data custody) will leave with relevant information about their crime and their personal background that could be very gravy for some journalists or turn against them. In the end, they have little control over the research process and need to trust your words and the role you have committed to comply with blindly, because, being imprisoned, their ability to get information about you and check the veracity of your professional profile is limited. For instance, I myself was judged to be a policewoman in disguise by an inmate who had confessed to having enjoyed child sex abusive material. After his confession, the participant changed his attitude toward me and became suspicious trying to find a second intention for the rest of the questions I formulated, thus ruining my data collection. Potentially, he felt comfortable during the interview and that is why he shared his intimate feelings, but subsequently he might have felt fragile and exposed and reacted being frightened to ruin his good reputation at the center, so he potentially invented that he was being investigated by the police. In this case, I gave up the data collection because there was no evidence I could provide him to stop his conspiracy thoughts. Another inmate was reluctant to say aloud that he had sexually abused minors in his explicit belief of me having the loudspeaker of the prison connected somehow to the table in the room we were in for the interview. Potentially, he was afraid that his crime was revealed to other inmates. In that case, I let him some time to vent about the emotions he had when other inmates asked him about his crime and then I provided many evidences that his testimony will be kept confidential: I reminded him the information I could and could not disclose regarding the consent form signed; I let him check there was no button connected to any loudspeaker in the table; I insisted before any question about his crime that no information was to be shared and I showed him how I kept my notes safe in a folder before leaving the center. In sum, each inmate will differ in their degree of confidence with you, but in my experience, being very explicit about the aim of the interview and explicitly state what is confidential and what it is not is always a safe option. For that reason, during the first session I devote enough time to the consent form: it is extremely important to calm their concerns down and solve all their potential questions.

On the other hand, some participants may provoke awkward situations just for fun or to prove the researcher's limits, such as exaggerating sexual information or being seductive. In those cases, the information gathered may be contaminated, plus the authority of the researcher may be called into question. My suggestion is to use silence as a way to make evident the unseemly situation the inmate has generated to subsequently indicate him or her that the comment was not appropriate to then continue the interview: this way, having set the limits, you are maintaining the objective distant atmosphere while giving the participant a second chance to continue the interview. It is likely that the participant will be embarrassed and give up the seductive attitude immediately. However, if the attitude persists, or if it turns into “how picky you are,” it is better to stop the interview and arrange a new meeting, since no

useful data will be collected that day and thus, the participant will understand that gets nothing by performing like that. In my experience, the frequency of the aforementioned circumstance is rare, and it is more frequent to find some willful and respectful participant, since their routine in prison is broken with the novelty of participating in some research and they will not be willing to ruin and lose that. By contrast, you will likely find inmates willing to extend the session as a way to extend their contact with the outer world, especially because the stigma they have for having sexually offended may have reduced their chances to interact openly with others, and therefore, you will need to be prepared on how to politely give the interview closure.

Finally, in case you are new to this type of research, I recommend that, if possible, you team with another colleague and collect the data together at least until you feel confident and ready to do it alone. With two researchers, one could lead the interview, so that he or she can be focused on formulating the questions, appreciating non-verbal cues in the subject relevant to the interview (i.e., signs of discomfort), and maintaining eye contact; while the other, that I coin “backup,” can act as a prompter reminding you questions that you may have forgotten to pose, so that you do not need to panic if you go blank, as well as can help you registering by hand the core content of the interview, so that the flow of the conversation between the inmate and you is kept and the rapport generated is not broken by taking long time in writing the responses down. Also, the backup can share with you comments about your performance, so that you both can debrief later and think ways to improve. This is the way that I use with the postgraduate students who are part of my research team (at the beginning I act as the interview leader with them being witness-backups, then I myself act as their backups, and after that, the students are paired in couples and they exchange turns playing both roles). In my experience, using this procedure helps the couple to feel very backed up between each other, especially if some awkward situation happens, as they can cope with it together.

4 Techniques Employed

4.1 Highlight Your Expertise

Without being pretentious, it is useful to mention your experience and education in sex-offending research because, as far as I have seen, this makes participants feel comfortable to talk about sensitive topics, as they expect you to know how to handle their input. For example, usually, people who suffer from pedophilia or have committed sex crime offenses have diverse paraphilic interests (Seto, 2018b), therefore you will likely hear about sensitive sexual vocabulary such as zoophilia, gang bang, fisting, or urophilia, to name a few. Also, participants with pedophilia will have rarely disclosed their sexual interest. Therefore, if you have highlighted that your experience is large, the participant will assume that you will not show surprise or

disgust because you will have already heard about these practices and the interview will run smoothly (e.g., “I came up with this research after a course I was taught in the Charité Hospital of Berlin on how to intervene with people with pedophilia and hebephilia”; “Never mind in using any vocabulary you may want to: after 3 years delivering workshops at prisons, I am used to a vast array of stories”).

4.2 *Stay Updated and Ask If You Are Not*

If you are not used to sexual vocabulary, try to become familiar with it soon (qualitative studies are ideal for that). However, it is likely that despite your efforts some new term you are unaware of will appear during the interview. In those cases, my advice is not to continue as if you had understood it, because that term may be crucial for your research (i.e., it might be relevant to understand the motivations or the *modus operandi*). Instead, show interest from the perspective of research curiosity (e.g., “Ups, it is the first time that I hear that term, could you please develop it a bit more? That might be interesting for our research!”⁸). Also, examine how comfortable you and your participant feel when hearing and talking about sexual vocabulary and try to find the best balance. For instance, it may happen that some participants are very open to use slang while others may be reluctant to do so, in respect to their religious feelings: it is important as a researcher that you can detect signs of discomfort at this point to adapt your vocabulary to their usage. In my case, to avoid forced formalisms and encourage free use of vocabulary, I always tell in the very first session that they can use the terms they feel more comfortable with, and I explicitly say some slang and some formal words to let them freely choose what to use. For example, I would say to the participant:

At some point we will arrive at the questions related to the sex domain. Here you can say “fuck” rather than “make love” or “cum” rather than “come” if that is how you feel more “you” when talking. Do not mind about myself-I have heard so many different things, stories, and words along all these years that I will not be embarrassed at all: I’m interested in your feelings, not in how you phrase them. However, if using those words is something that you prefer not to do, that is perfectly OK as well. Each one has their own preferences. So please, just talk the way you feel more comfortable and that will be OK.

Besides, in online grooming research there are plenty of trendy online platforms and dating apps where the initial contacts tend to occur, and they should be familiar for the researcher as well. Otherwise, the participant will feel that you are not trained enough and will probably avoid disclosing relevant information. However, avoid revealing examples the first time, because if your participant was unaware of the information, you will be contributing to teach a new method or platform to abuse others.

⁸Note here the use of the exclamation mark to highlight the enthusiastic tone, thus I show real interest for their response without a distant attitude.

4.3 Tackling with No Assumption of the Crime

Even when your research sample consists of convicted inmates and therefore serving firm sentences, it is very common that inmates with sexual offenses do not assume their full responsibility and blame the victim or the judicial system, contrary to inmates with sentences about economic and financial crimes, that may feel proud and willing to recognize their abilities to trick others. Therefore, referring to their crime in second person (e.g., “When you committed the sexual abuse, I would like to know more about ...”) will likely make them to react and respond as if they were in a trial. My suggestion is to use the impersonal voice or to refer to the sentence so that the judgment remains something external to the interviewer but acknowledged (e.g., “In a legal document says that you were involved in a sexual aggression. I would like to know more about...”). In case they still deny the crime, the data collection may fail since they will maintain they did nothing. In those cases, assess whether indirect questions may still be valid for your research (e.g., “What type of people do you think that...?”).

4.4 Overcoming Embarrassment

Tackling sexual content is not easy because it is linked with intimacy, and there are certain topics that even people who have committed sexual offenses may sometimes be ashamed to talk about, such as masturbation, sexual fantasies, or pornography consumption. However, sometimes collecting this information is crucial for your research. In those cases, some recommendations are: warn the participant from the first session about the type of questions you will pose, so the topic does not take the person by surprise; explain the reason why those topics need to be tackled, otherwise the participant may feel you are fulfilling some curiosity alien to the study; do not raise these topics at the beginning of the interview but after some trust has been established between the participant and yourself, and use some indirect method to collect the data. For example, imagine that you need to ask about the sexual fantasies that the subject has. Asking directly “What sexual fantasies do you feel more excited about?” is a straightforward question but it may not yield elaborated responses (imagine yourself in front of someone that you do not know asking you to share that intimate content). Instead, you could acknowledge their potential embarrassment this way:

For our research project [1], getting to know the sexual fantasies of people who are serving sentences for sexual and non-sexual crimes [2] is relevant, because it can help in elaborating more specific and appropriate interventions. [3]. That is why the information you provide us may help in this task. I know it can be a bit embarrassing but remember that my interest is not knowing more about your personal life as an individual but trying to see the information of all the participants from a collective perspective to see whether we can extract common information after many interviews and thus drawing conclusions [4].

- [1]: contextualize and remember that you are involved in a serious task.
- [2]: following the advice above, you refer to the content of the sentence, without using the second-person language.
- [3]: repeat the aim of your research and its link to the upcoming questions, this way the inmate will understand the need to tackle with something that intimate.
- [4]: by deindividualizing the upcoming responses, the inmates may feel less ashamed to share their information.

4.5 Asking About Sexual Content

If you need to collect sexual information, it is recommended to differentiate between fantasies (what they imagine) and facts (what they do), since not all people make or are willing to make their fantasies true. This way you can get to know their desires and motivations separately from the actions they engage with. Also, it is recommended to gather information about the sex, gender, and body scheme rather than age of the people they are attracted to (remember that “age” may not accurately represent the type of people the subject is attracted to, see Tanner, 1962) as well as the modus, namely, the concrete actions they or their partners and victims perform (Beier, 2021). The former three aspects—sex, gender, and body scheme—refer to the characteristics of the people involved in their fantasies and facts, whereas the modus refer to the actions they or the subjects they are attracted to enact in their fantasies and facts. Asking about this content may be difficult. Thus, one advice I learned from a workshop with the Dunkelfeld team of experts was asking indirectly about them: invite the participant to imagine that you had all the money needed to produce the most exciting pornographic video for them and ask the subject what should appear on it. This way you can ask about all the characters, set-up, actions, etc., indirectly (e.g., “Which people should appear in the video, how do they look?”, “Which characteristic should I ask for in the casting?” “Which places should I book for the movie to take place?”).

4.6 If Pedophilia Is Present, State Your Position from the Beginning

These subjects usually show cognitive distortions that justify their sexual attraction or their abusive acts and may want to recruit your opinion and support about some of the questions you pose. Do not fall into the trap thinking that you should play along with them not to lose data: they know that you are a researcher, not a colleague. Thus, avoid endorsing their thoughts and state clearly your position from the beginning (e.g., “Remember that I respect your attraction, which you did not choose, but I do not endorse your actions, which you can choose whether to perform or not”); avoid saying ambiguous commentaries (e.g., “People may have different

opinions but I'm interested in knowing yours") or do not mind in bringing back the question (e.g., "Why is so important for you knowing my opinion? Does it change anything?").

5 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

5.1 Ethical Aspects

Before any research involving humans is conducted, regardless of the topic and according to each regional-specific legislation (i.e., Declaration of Helsinki in Europe), the permission from an Ethics Committee must be granted.⁹ In the case of sexual offending, some relevant aspects should also be carefully thought of in advance. First, how you will not interfere with their treatment; since treatment reduces recidivism in people with sex offenses (e.g., Schmucker & Lösel, 2017), your research should not prevail over their treatment. On a daily basis, this means trying to plan your slots of time for research in a way that does not collide with the slots of time the inmates have booked for activities, jobs, or workshops related to their treatment.

Second, how you will reduce potential stigma: inmates with sex offenses very frequently hide their crimes¹⁰ especially when the victims were minors to the point that it has been considered for decades "the most closely guarded secret of American prisons" (Weiss & Friar, 1974, cited in Eigenberg, 1989). This means that they will have probably lied about the reason for their incarceration when asked about by other inmates. Therefore, if your research team will be identified as performing some research about sexual offenses at a certain prison, then both the prison staff or other inmates could associate each participant with that type of crime, and stigma in prison can turn into further aggression (Schwaebe, 2005; Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013). Thus, taking measures at this respect will be much appreciated by the inmates and could enhance their confidence to participate in your project, since you have

⁹ Usually, all universities and research centers have their own Board, composed of some colleagues, that will review your proposal and admit it to be performed, admit it with some minor changes, or will not consider it ethically. As the Board has no legal power, in case they do not consider your design ethical, you could still perform the study, however you could be admonished at your center plus you will likely struggle with scientific publication because some evidence of a research committee approval is needed before acceptance.

¹⁰ There is research about crime concealing (Schwaebe, 2005, p. 617):

- "Inmate: I didn't tell anyone about why I was in there. I even made up a couple of stories when some of the guys asked, "Why you in for?" You need to be able to quickly come up with something otherwise they know you're hiding something.
- Researcher: What did you come up with?
- Inmate: I just told them I was in for computer crimes, computer fraud, since I knew computers really well and it's also semitrue; it was child pornography and computer fraud."

thought of how to avoid potential negative consequences for them. Importantly, applying these measures are not synonymous with supporting their crime or turning your intervention into an accomplice, but just being respectful with human dignity and avoiding further aggressions. An example of this strategy is to request the prison responsible not to call the participants by their names by the loudspeaker system when asked for attending the interview. If their names have to be said anyway, then think of a neutral euphemism for your research to be used aloud if needed (i.e., for example, I named “Behavioural Rehabilitation Program” to a program that was originally named as “Child sexual offenders’ program.” The new name could be applied to a myriad of other workshops whereas the original name stigmatized their participants, therefore when announced through the loudspeaker, no inferences upon the inmates that attended the session were made). Another potential strategy is to randomize participants. In case you have a control group with no sex offenses plus a group of inmates with sex offenses, try to interview all the participants in random order. This way, other inmates will rarely associate your research with a certain type of crime.

Another element of any ethical research is the consent form. All the participants of any research must sign a consent form before the research is conducted. In this document, some international and national obligations apply (i.e., explicitly indicate that they can withdraw at any point), but in my experience, people with sex offenses usually expose some other concerns that should be highlighted and therefore remarked somehow in the document (i.e., some bold and underlined sentence) or during the session in which the document is signed (i.e., the researcher reads it aloud and repeat it twice), such as the following: (i) Is any of the researchers associated somehow with the prison staff? (ii) Will any agent with potential authority be informed about the information collected through the research? (iii) Which other inmates will be potentially informed about the aim of the project? and (iv) Which concrete measures apply to ensure anonymity or association with sexual crimes?

Data storage is another critical aspect to consider, and there are legal procedures in each region that you may need to comply with (e.g., GDPR regulations). On many occasions, you will be collecting sensitive data (e.g., sexual information, health data, biometrics...) about people within a vulnerable context; therefore, the storage and process of this outcome requires special protection. As you may probably have collected relevant information in paper, using display books is recommended, so that everything is spot-protected, hidden to any potential eavesdropper, and organized. In those folders, I usually also have some helpful “first-aid kit” consisting of ID copies of my collaborators, the official authorization granted, extra data sheet templates, and extra pieces of paper. Importantly, you are responsible for this folder and you must keep it always under your unique supervision and control (e.g., in some drawer with an individualized key at your office). In case you digitalized the information, use the online driver of your institution, which is usually encrypted, and only provide access to your collaborators after they have signed a research commitment form.

In this research commitment form, make it explicit that no collaborator will be allowed to share any information in their social networks or disclose information to

people alien to the research. This will be of special relevance in case you interview people who are receiving a lot of attention from the media, and you will benefit from having a conversation with each collaborator prior to their participation to discuss data protection and confidentiality. Finally, I recommend you generate your own code and protocol of data storage. For instance, I coded each individual report with four digits: the first digit informed about the prison where I conducted the study; the second digit informed about the crime committed by the participant; and the last two digits coded the number of the participant. Thus, identifying some individual or some misplaced document becomes very easy. Also, I elaborated some rules to upload information in the driver folder, such as how each document will be titled or how many documents per subject will be created, so that further searches, especially when the sample is big, can be eased.

5.2 Emotional Aspect

Doing research on sexual offending can have an impact on your psychological well-being. There is interesting research explaining from first-person experiences how researchers can become emotionally involved (Campbell, 2022), especially when they have kids while studying topics such as child sexual abuse. Being affected does not mean being a bad researcher, but just being human.

For example, during the most intensive weeks of research in my career, I would go to prison 4 days a week to interview four different inmates who will share with me impressive, fine-grained details about their violent actions, which would sometimes entail hearing stories about anal penetration to babies, forced sex with adolescents, infrequent paraphilias such as sadistic zoophilic scenarios, and sexist comments. In the afternoon, I would change to a different prison to provide clinic assistance to a group of inmates with sexual offenses against children and adults who will also describe their offenses while confronting ideas about consensual sex or how child develop. Thus, at the end of the month, I will probably know about 30 different crimes in detail and create different images in my mind about them, being unable to not give faces and bodies to the victims of the stories they were telling me. Consequently, I started having nightmares and rejecting tokens of affection at home in the following weeks.

Also, as in sexual offending research you discover that there is no profile in the people who commit sexual offenses, I failed into reinforcing an atmosphere of distrust about anyone around. For example, I remember once that I accompanied a friend to pick her daughter up after school and, when the child came up running, led by the illusion of finding me there, she mistakenly hugged another pair of legs, belonging to a father that was also there waiting for his children to come out of school. At that moment, I disproportionately gave her a dressing-down, lecturing her about the potential risk behind hugging an unknown person, but without measuring the intensity of my argument and definitely ruining her moment of joy after unexpectedly seeing me there with her mum. In those cases, the best

recommendation is not to be ashamed to recognise that the job is affecting you emotionally, stop data collection and stay apart from the topic as much as you need. Also, debriefing with an experienced colleague is very recommended, as it is also done in crisis intervention (Scott et al., 2021). During this debriefing, I would share my feelings (e.g., anxiety), my identified psychophysical symptoms (e.g., nightmares), my distorted concerns (e.g., “All unknown people are potential offenders”), and my change of behavior (e.g., what happened with my friends’ daughter) with my colleague, who would help me venting; reducing my anxiety (e.g., reminding me that getting to know “the truth of sexual offending” is difficult at prisons because of concealment, lies or sample size) and planning my return to research. In my case, this planning consisted of taking 2 months off the project and coming back to research, reducing the number of days I used to go to prison per week while combining it with data collection in another non-related project so that things could go back to normal.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

I have learned three lessons through performing this type of research. First, this might be a research topic restricted to a concrete period of your career, and that is OK. Your sensitivity may change across your life, for example after having your own children or just because you feel you have accumulated too many traumatic stories and want to change to a lighter topic. This does not mean that you have become a bad researcher. Science should not be a competition of who copes better with anything, but an enjoyable process trying to contribute something to the world.

Second, control your ego and bet on ethics. Being ethical with participants will be returned in the shape of trust and respect; while being ethical in your studies, such as keeping silence after having interviewed some offenders who are getting a lot of media attention, will be returned in respect by other colleagues and trustworthy reputation. Bear in mind that your participants, although may have committed horrible crimes, are still humans and deserve to be treated with dignity.

And last, think twice when disclosing your results in dissemination activities, as in your audience there might be potential victims who suffered some sexual violence, or some person who had already or will potentially commit some sex offense, and all of them can be affected by your words: in the case of survivors, by feeling outraged if you share rugged details because they may think you are not respectful to their pain; you support people who commit sexual offenses, or you aim to obtain applauses rather than to contribute to sexual abuse prevention; in the case of potential offenders, because thanks to sharing those rugged details they may learn how to harm others. Thus, before sharing information, have this double role in mind and ask yourself which risks entail disclosing your information and decide what to take out of your presentation accordingly. You may lose some wow-effect, but you may be protecting others while doing so. However, always have in mind that science entails dissemination and therefore balances your caution with self-censorship that

may go against the intellectual progress of your field. In sum, what I have learned is that doing science in this topic involves not only producing content, but also protecting others and protecting oneself during the whole process.

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Chapter 24

Control, Confusion, and Failure: Fieldwork in Areas of Violent Conflict and Limited State Authority



Berit Bliesemann de Guevara  and Nerve V. Macaspac 

1 Fieldwork in Areas of Violent Conflict and Limited State Authority

Fieldwork in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority shares central characteristics with other fieldwork contexts – from questions of participant access to ethical considerations of informed consent, and from reflections on researcher positionality to data interpretation. Yet, the consequences of ‘getting it wrong’ in violent conflict contexts can be metaphorically and literally fatal: careless fieldwork behaviour can put not only the researcher, but also research participants and their wider communities at risk (Grimm et al., 2020, pp. 1–14). In this chapter, we use insights from our fieldwork in Colombia and the Philippines to unpack major issues concerning research methods, ethics, and emotions that fieldworkers in such contexts may face.

Building upon key dimensions of fieldwork in violent or closed contexts (Bliesemann de Guevara & Bøås, 2020), we develop our discussions through notions of *control*, *confusion*, and *failure*, which we argue are central to fieldwork encounters. Control is the default position of the researcher described in standard methods books: well-prepared with all formal permissions in place, research encounters go to plan, yield valuable data, and feed back into the study design. Confusion, by contrast, is often the experience when research is put into practice, no matter how well-planned: researchers encounter potential interlocutors who decline to participate, continuously negotiate their positionality vis-à-vis different people

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and situations, or improvise on the hoof – all of which raises safeguarding questions in areas of violent conflict. Not seldom does the messiness of fieldwork lead to self-doubts and feelings of failure of not being able to live up to the image of control (Kušić & Zahora, 2020). This is not to say that fieldwork cannot or should not be planned for – on the contrary – but planning and control are two different things. Rather, we argue that issues around control, confusion, and failure in fieldwork are linked to two dynamics beyond the researchers' control: the complex and challenging violent environments where researchers conduct fieldwork; and the rigid expectations of academia that has yet to fully account for the complex, if not life-and-death, challenges researchers navigate during social-scientific research in highly volatile environments.

While unique in their respective national or local specificity, the contexts we focus on have in common that there is ongoing armed violence between several state and non-state armed actors. State authority is limited insofar as the state does not have the control over its entire territory or population but competes with other actors over land, resources, and people. Characteristically, there are areas within conflict-affected states which are controlled by non-state armed actors, who may provide basic services to the population and thus be seen as legitimate (Schlichte, 2009). This does not necessarily mean, however, that the state in question is 'weak': conflict-affected states often show (degrees of) authoritarianism and disregard for human rights, while some state agents or institutions may be deeply involved in, and benefit from, collusion or cooperation with non-state violent and/or criminal actors and activities (Idler, 2019). Both the lack of control over some areas and simultaneous authoritarian features make fieldwork in such areas particularly challenging.

There are many actors of potential interest to social-scientific studies on violent conflict. Those most frequently engaged include, on the one hand, so-called elites among national state agencies, non-state armed groups, international organisations, national and international NGOs, and civil society organisations, whose representatives are engaged through 'elite interviews'. On the other hand, conflict-affected populations, often framed as 'victims of violent conflict', are studied through a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, especially in the aftermath of acute violence – as the academic 'gold rush' after the 2016 peace agreement between government and FARC guerrillas in Colombia exemplifies.

Here, we draw on our own research, which in Nerve's case explored a community-led peace zone maintained by Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines amidst over five decades of a Maoist-style insurgency and state counterinsurgency (Macaspac, 2019, 2022). Community-led peace zones (or peace communities) are formed by marginalised civilians who use unarmed self-protection strategies, showing a third path between enduring ('victim') or committing ('perpetrator') violence in conflict. Through in-depth interviews, ethnographic immersion, and participant observation, Nerve investigated what is required of ordinary people in making the peace zone work, particularly since both state and non-state armed actors strive to delegitimise or violate the community norms and regulations that provide protection to community members from conflict-related violence and death. This also makes navigating fieldwork more complex and difficult, since peace zones – far from being fully

demilitarised, neutral, autonomous, or liberated places – are highly contentious spaces. Through fieldwork, Nerve understood that community members must painstakingly and constantly assert the legitimacy of their unarmed self-protection efforts, placing their lives on the line. They do so in addition to navigating the precarity of daily community life shaped by historical marginalisation as Indigenous peoples, government neglect, militarisation, and a constantly looming possibility of armed violence.

Berit's collaborative research with Colombian colleagues used narrative biographical interviews, ethnographic observation, and a creative textile method (embroidery) to explore the subjectivities and relationships of demobilised FARC guerrilla fighters and peasant host communities in two rural areas of Antioquia after the 2016 peace agreement.¹ They asked how, after decades of violent conflict, people could live on and live together, seeking to go beyond dominant discourse to explore participants' alternative and preferred stories about their past, present, and future. While the 2016 agreement ended this armed conflict, other armed groups and FARC dissidents have continued the violence, which for the research communities in Dabeiba and Mutatá meant a simultaneous presence of state agencies and local non-state armed groups. The fieldwork thus took place in an ambiguous 'no war, no peace' setting, wherein rural communities continue to live in the shadow of violence. Fieldwork was further complicated by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) process designed to 'administer transitional justice and deal with crimes committed in the framework of the armed conflict',² which had implications for what some participants were willing to talk about regarding past violence.

There are many helpful resources, based on authors' reflections on the difficulties of conflict-related fieldwork, which touch upon a much wider range of issues than this short chapter can cover (e.g. Bliesemann de Guevara & Bøås, 2020; Grimm et al., 2020; Mac Ginty et al., 2021; Mazurana et al., 2014; Millar, 2017; Nordstrom & Robben, 1996; Rivas & Browne, 2019; Sriram et al., 2009). In the following, we concentrate on select core challenges we encountered during fieldwork in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, and use control, confusion, and failure as analytical lenses for our discussion. We first discuss two types of methods commonly used in conflict research – interviews and ethnographic observation – to reflect on issues of relations, time, space, suspicion, positionality, and security. We then turn to research ethics, delving into the institutional ethics approval process and the question of roles researchers can play in interactions with research communities. Finally, we unpack some emotions surrounding fieldwork in areas of violent conflict, focusing on critical empathy, ethnographic seduction, and friendship versus partnership.

¹(Un-)Stitching Gazes project website: <https://des-tejiendomiradas.com/en/inicio-english/>

²Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP) website: <https://www.jep.gov.co/JEP/Paginas/Jurisdiccion-Especial-para-la-Paz.aspx>

2 Methodological Challenges of Fieldwork in Areas of Violent Conflict

2.1 Interviews: Relationships, Time, Space

During his fieldwork in the community-led peace zone in the Philippines, Nerve had carefully planned an interview with a local *barangay* [community] official and was waiting to hear about his interlocutor's availability, when he found out by phone that the official wanted to meet him at his home while a meeting between armed actors took place there. 'I felt uncertainty, unpreparedness, discouragement, and an unpleasant emotion of anticipating that something might go wrong or that I might be entering a risky situation', he recalls in his fieldnotes. It also did not help that he had less than a minute to decide how to proceed, while the official was on the other end of the phone waiting for his response. Structured or unstructured interviewing is a research method commonly used for social-scientific data collection, yet organising interviews in conflict areas presents us with a particular set of challenges, some of which are highlighted above: the selection of interview participants and sites, and the role that time plays in it. Interviews require a considerable amount of planning, care, awareness, and sensitivity towards research communities' past and present experiences in the context of the conflict, and regarding researchers' and interlocutors' safety and security both during and after the research (Grimm et al., 2020). Despite extensive pre-fieldwork planning, the researcher may only grasp these dimensions in their context-specificity while already in the field. The challenge is to decide how to balance between control and flexibility, when unexpected situations present themselves.

Interview participant selection is a key step in data collection. In an ideal scenario, the researcher has full control in compliance with an established selection process such as snowball sampling. While following such processes to the letter is challenging in the best of cases, in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, the researcher's personal safety and/or that of the research interlocutors and their community may dictate which specific interviews can or cannot be conducted. This is not always a straightforward assessment though. For one, our own dispositions and experiences come into play here, making some researchers more comfortable than others in face-to-face interviews with military officers, rebel leaders, or individuals with proven records of human rights abuses. Yet, also research with less controversial figures comes with its own risks, especially when decisions need to be taken immediately as potential interview opportunities arise (cf. Bøås, 2020, pp. 68–71). For instance, the researcher's interactions may function as a 'tracer' which state or non-state agents can use to monitor rebel movements within the community or spy on community members' interactions with armed groups.

Such considerations were present in Nerve's moment of confusion in the situation described above: What implications would it have to arrive unprepared at a 'meeting' between state and non-state armed actors, without enough time to assess the risks? Being a graduate student with no particular training in assessing the risks

of academic research in low-intensity conflict environments, he felt inadequately prepared to take immediate solitary decisions that could have strategic and long-term implications (cf. Gallien, 2021). Fortunately, Nerve's decision to eventually proceed did not present any risks in the end: there was no 'meeting' being held, as the call turned out to be a practical joke well played on him by his interlocutor. Yet the situation, and Nerve's very real emotions of confusion and anxiety at the time, raise important questions about interviewing as a relational practice that is related to time (or lack thereof) and takes place in physical locations within an area of violent conflict.

Regarding research relationships, a common source of fieldwork confusion or failure is hesitation or refusal of potential participants to be interviewed. While interviewees' informed consent is a bedrock of ethical research, the researcher may find that refusal or hesitation to partake is widespread. Residents of marginalised rural communities in conflict zones in Colombia and the Philippines may hesitate to interact with or distrust researchers, due to fear of reprisals from armed actors or their past experiences of conflict-related violence, abuse, and terror. Or they may simply be uninterested in the research. The Colombia project team encountered both: some peasant women of the marginalised rural communities now hosting former FARC fighters were pleased to finally be recognised as agents with a voice by researchers but also wary of paramilitary presence in the area and therefore careful with what information they share. Meanwhile, many inhabitants of the so-called Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation [*Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y la Reincorporación*] (ETCR), locations designated to the settlement of FARC peace signatories, and of the New Reincorporation Areas [*Nuevas Áreas de Reincorporación*] (NAR), self-managed settlements of FARC peace signatories, lacked interest in our study – not least due to increasing over-research and 'over-projectification' of ETCRs and NARs by researchers, NGOs, and state agencies (cf. Kelly, 2021; Lai, 2020).

Relationships are particularly complex when the researcher is neither clearly 'local' nor 'international', as in Nerve's case. While being a Filipino citizen who grew up in Manila, he was living in the USA as a graduate student when he conducted fieldwork in the Philippines. As someone who is trained in the Global North and conducts ethnographic research in his home country in the Global South, he has to navigate complex relationships and positionalities. A central experience is what he refers to as 'double suspicion': local communities tend to be suspicious of the supposed western perspectives of researchers like him, while the community of scholars in the Global North tends to be suspicious that they lack scholarly distance (Macaspac, 2018; cf. Göğüş, 2019).

The researcher, too, can be self-selecting in terms of who among the local actors they want to interview – for research design-related, normative, or security reasons. Although it may not be straightforward as to how identity is negotiated in different field encounters (Clausen, 2020), identity markers such as the researcher's gender, whether they belong to a minority or marginalised group including LGBTQ, Indigenous Peoples, religious, or ethnic minorities, or are from a working-class

background, may make researchers more attentive to their own personal feelings of safety, security, or respect when selecting research interlocutors.

Time, a resource in short supply in academia, has proven to be essential in both our projects to build the trust needed for respectful, safe, and insightful interviewing of members of marginalised communities. In the Colombia project, this took the form of reiterative conversations over the course of a year, only some of which were recorded as formal interviews. Community-based interviews are often different from interviews with people who work in offices, such as politicians, technocrats, academics, or NGO professionals, with limited and defined slots for interviews providing little time to establish rapport or personal connection. In both our projects, first encounters with research interlocutors alone could take an hour or two, especially given that many of them were ‘multi-tasking’ during conversations: taking care of children, feeding animals, chopping firewood, cooking, talking to family members, or neighbours. Allowing the research to align with interlocutors’ rhythms and going with the flow were key.

The other key element is space. Choosing the location of an interview is a complex process, particularly within a different cultural context (Bayeck, 2021). In areas of violent conflict or repressive political regimes, it requires more than identifying what makes a comfortable or safe place for both interviewer and interlocutor, as the geographic or spatial context of the field site directly shapes data collection and research. Knowledge is embodied within a particular spatial context (Holton & Riley, 2014; Massey, 2005). Consequentially, interview sites play a role in shaping the kinds of data interviews yield: there is a direct relationship between ‘what people say and where they say it’ (Evans & Jones, 2011, p. 851). The interview site is a space that carries meanings and informs the thoughts and actions of interview participant and researcher; it creates particular spatial practices or relationships (Riley, 2010). Because interview sites are always embedded and situated within broader social spaces, they create a ‘microgeography’ of social interactions and meanings generated through the encounter between researcher and interlocutor (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Hein et al., 2008). In an ideal situation, researchers would just defer to their interlocutors where interviews can be held based on the most convenient location for them. In rural areas, due to a lack of ‘neutral spaces’ such as cafes, this is often participants’ homes or agricultural lands, but even in urban locations where such neutral spaces are available, they may not make the interlocutor comfortable to speak because they are public, and conversations might be overheard (Göransson, 2020). Such deferral to the interlocutor, however, is at odds with many universities’ risk advice, especially when working alone, as it is seen to have potential safety implications for the researcher who relinquishes some control to participants.

2.2 *Ethnographic Participant Observation: Suspicion, Positionality, Security*

The ethnographic method of participant observation allows the researcher the continuous immersion required to better capture the complex, messy dimensions of the phenomenon under study. In areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, a common experience that researchers face is being suspected a ‘spy’ (Macaspac, 2018; Sluka, 2012). Suspicion is a tool to control the civilian population by generating a constant sense of fear and anxiety which replaces the openness of community life, for example when residents are accused by armed actors of taking sides (Pettigrew, 2003). During ethnographic fieldwork, suspicion shapes the interactions and relationships of researchers and interlocutors, often exposing them to greater risks of being harmed or vilified by armed actors. Suspicion is commonly experienced in fieldwork, yet the ways in which researchers from the Global North and South become an object of suspicion and the consequences vary (Macaspac, 2018). While foreign researchers are often viewed as ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’, local researchers, because of their personal background or political involvement, are easily perceived as biased or lacking neutrality by state or non-state armed groups or community residents.

A researcher’s identity, positionality, and proximity to power thus works to expand or limit their capacity to mitigate these risks. For instance, exiting the field during extreme security situations would look differently based on a researcher’s passport, resources, race or ethnicity, gender, or other markers of identity and privilege (Abufarha, 2009). Due to their citizenship, national/local researchers are subjected to local laws, security policies, and state surveillance in their countries differently from foreign researchers. If suspected by the military, their current and future professional careers can be jeopardised if they intend to live and work in their home countries (cf. Driscoll, 2020; Heathershaw & Mullojonov, 2020). Even without being under suspicion, the careless researcher is at risk of revealing professional and personal information that might be used to harm them or their research interlocutors, if data protection or digital security is not taken seriously (Grimm et al., 2020, pp. 89–128; Verdery, 2018). A researcher must therefore carefully assess who to interact with directly or indirectly during ethnographic fieldwork, where, when, and for how long, to enable ethnographic immersion while preparing for cases of danger.

One of the key challenges during ethnographic fieldwork in conflict areas is the researcher’s limited access to substantive, if not comprehensive, security information on the ground. Researchers must plan and implement activities based upon an understanding and daily assessment of the conflict, particularly if there is active combat or potential violence. Ideally, they have access to security intelligence to inform their daily and long-term research activities, yet in reality such access is often limited, and many researchers do not have training in acquiring, evaluating, and managing intelligence data. While a possible step is to gather and keep track of daily conflict dynamics, as one would check the daily weather report, carrying out

such ‘intelligence work’ in the field has implications for the trust between researcher and interlocutors and merits serious planning, consideration, communication, and coordination with research partners, hosts in the community, or most trusted research interlocutors. For instance, if word circulates (i.e. rumours) that the researcher is asking questions about military operations or rebel movements, this could be interpreted as a threat. In the Colombia project, the team monitored the general security situation in the region and discussed their field visits with trusted host community members but refrained from asking direct questions about armed actors’ movements and activities to avoid doubts about their research focus. In the Philippines, Nerve worked closely with some interlocutors and community hosts and sought their guidance when planning, conducting, and navigating his daily activities both as a researcher and, equally important, as a guest of his particular community hosts and the community in general. Since the researcher does not have much control over the circulation of information associated with their name and activities in the field, the dilemma is one between looking after one’s own personal safety and security, while avoiding the perils of overlapping social-scientific research with actual intelligence (i.e. surveillance) work (see Koopman, 2016; Wainwright, 2016; Sheppard & Tyner, 2016).

Thoroughly preparing, planning, and setting up infrastructures and systems of support to help ensure one’s personal security in the field including ‘exit strategies’ is important (Grimm et al., 2020), but it is distinct from intelligence work and governed by different ethical standards and procedures (Dawson, 2011). The researcher who is interested in ethnographic fieldwork in conflict areas must develop a level of skills and confidence in how to gather and evaluate security information and integrate these skills and knowledge as factors to consider when they implement their research. Experienced conflict researchers such as Verweijen (2020) who undertook fieldwork in remote active conflict areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sangaré & Bleck (2020) who conducted collaborative research in the active conflict environment of Mali, recommend working closely with knowledgeable people and/or organisations on the ground to master these challenges.

3 Ethical Issues of Fieldwork in Areas of Violent Conflict

Many conflict researchers’ ‘red rag’ is the ethics review process, often perceived not as a support structure to help navigate the ethical and safety challenges of difficult contexts, but as a bureaucratic bulwark against any research in ‘fragile contexts’. As Fisher (2021, p. 17) observes, ‘it can often feel that ethics committees are just there to keep us away from the peoples and places at the heart of our research’. While the ethical challenges of conflict research are certainly not to be underestimated and have been widely discussed (e.g. Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; Fujii, 2012), the increase in university regulation of fieldwork-based research has been linked to processes of securitisation and bureaucratisation/judicialisation, which address universities’ liability concerns rather than actual research ethics or risks (Russo &

Strazzari, 2020). Indeed, based on their own experiences with a research collaboration in Central Asia ‘gone wrong’, Heathershaw and Mullojonov (2020) argue that what is needed is not an institutional-bureaucratic, but a vocational approach to fieldwork ethics in violent and closed contexts, but that even such a vocational approach leaves some important dilemmas which cannot be satisfactorily resolved.

In the collaborative Colombia project, the team avoided the institutional-bureaucratic implications of the UK institution’s approach by relying on the Colombian university’s research ethics process which, while no less bureaucratic, at least ensured panel members had some context knowledge of the research locations. This was only possible, however, because the latter were not flagged as insecure by the British Foreign Office at the time, hence not raising any particular insurance concerns at the UK university – regardless of the actual safety situation which the team took seriously and monitored, but which was largely unconnected with the ethics process. To avoid that current institutional ethics processes hinder important research on areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, leaving ‘blank spaces on our social-scientific research maps’ (Bliesemann de Guevara & Bøås, 2020, p. 11), different collectives have offered advice on how to conduct ‘safer field research in the social sciences’ (Grimm et al., 2020) and which support role universities should play (AFIWG, 2021). Unless this advice is adopted more widely, however, researchers will likely continue to disaggregate institutional ethics processes (a formal prerequisite) from vocational ethics considerations (an safeguarding imperative riddled with practical dilemmas).

Beyond these processual questions, there was another ethical issue we both encountered in the field, but which the formal process did not prepare us for and which led to feelings of confusion or failure: Which roles would we feel compelled to assume, or be asked by others to take on, beyond our core role as researchers, and what should we do? The roles we want to discuss here exemplarily are the ‘social worker’ and the ‘political activist’. Fieldwork in areas of violent conflict is emotionally tough due to the individual and collective fates witnessed by the researcher. In her research on socioeconomic strategies in a refugee camp in Uganda, Bjørkhaug (2020) was mistaken by the camp inhabitants for an interviewer involved in refugees’ third-country repatriation and approached by many with horrific stories of violence, exploitation, and suffering, in the hope she would support their repatriation to Norway. She reflects on how she dealt with this situation: ‘For seven weeks, I listened to stories of people in utmost need and was careful not to make promises I could not fulfil. I felt heartless at times but argued with myself that it was better than breaking a promise’ (Bjørkhaug, 2020, p. 266).

Keeping the roles of ‘researcher’ and ‘social worker’ apart, as in this example, seems prudent, yet the closer we feel to our interlocutors, especially in immersive ethnographic fieldwork, the more we may feel compelled to ‘do something’ about their situation, to ‘help’ in some way. In Berit’s project, the Colombian team members indeed built close ties with some female research interlocutors and assisted them in personal matters beyond the extent of the project as a way ‘to give back’, yet two aspects are worth highlighting: assistance mainly concerned access to health services and support in medical processes, which the trained nurses on the team

were qualified to provide and which spoke to a general feminist ethics of care guiding the research; and the support happened between researchers and interlocutors from the same country, cutting out the ‘white saviour’ syndrome that often accompanies attempts at ‘rescuing’ the marginalised but may mainly serve to silence the privileged foreign researcher’s feelings of guilt.

The other role researchers may be compelled to take on is that of an ‘activist’. Some research approaches, such as participatory action research, are explicitly transformative in that their specific aim is to assist a community to research their own concerns and devise actions leading to a positive transformation of the original situation or problem. This is different from a researcher who, in her self-perception, ‘leverag[es] her privilege to stand in solidarity with powerless civilians living in badly governed parts of the globe, to uncover socially uncomfortable facts on behalf of people who cannot easily speak for themselves’ (Driscoll, 2020, p. 146), and who may engage in a high-profile media campaign or similar to reach her activist goals. While many of us may sympathise with this activist researcher, Driscoll (2020) has used game theory to spell out which unintended effects researcher activism may have in an authoritarian context, which in the worst case put local research interlocutors in serious danger, thus warranting caution. Nerve, for example, had to very carefully navigate his positionalities and academic and professional roles and responsibilities, including serving as a volunteer country expert on the Philippines for a global human rights NGO. He made conscious efforts to maintain his social-scientific research activities separate from his human rights work given that the objectives, ethics, impact, stakeholders, and intended audiences of each of these activities are distinct.

4 Emotional Aspects of Fieldwork in Areas of Violent Conflict

It is common in academic knowledge production to write researchers’ emotions out of publications. This stands in stark contrast with the emotional rollercoaster the personal experience of fieldwork in areas of violent conflict often resembles. Whether we feel anxious about the unknowns of our research experience as we embark on our first fieldwork, sad at learning about our interlocutors’ lives in the midst of structural and physical violences, empathetic towards some interlocutors’ political aims or disgusted by others’ violent behaviours or racist worldviews (Myrntinen, 2020), scared or worried of potential physical violence or surveillance (Bøås, 2020; Driscoll, 2020), accepted as we make new acquaintances or even friends, flustered as our interviewees flirt with us (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016), angry at a person or situation we strongly disagree with, helpless in the face of demands we cannot meet (Bjørkhaug, 2020), guilty about our own privilege (Kappler, 2021), bored by endless hours of waiting for the next interview (Agarwal, 2021), lonely because we are far away from family and friends which may exacerbate existing

depression (Záhora, 2019), disappointed by gatekeepers who break promises and make our lives difficult (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kurowska, 2020), or blue because our research does not seem to be going to plan (Bliesemann de Guevara & Poopuu, 2021) – there is no fieldwork in which these or other emotions do not play a role in the research experience. Yet while they may have a major effect on data generation and interpretation, emotions are little reflected upon.

There is no single accepted approach to ‘dealing with’ emotions in conflict-related field research. Regarding self-care during fieldwork, setting up emotional and practical support networks of colleagues and/or friends is recommended, and it has helped both of us to overcome some of the emotional challenges. Regarding the role of emotions in the actual research encounter, however, the picture is more mixed, and it will depend on the epistemological and methodological approach chosen whether and how emotions figure in the research. In their conclusions to a guidebook on fieldwork in violent and closed contexts, Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås (2020, p. 278) recommend that, ‘[c]ontrolling our emotions in the research situation should be the rule’. Meanwhile feminist researcher Cole (2019, p. 87), reflecting on her ‘affective failures’ of crying and laughing inappropriately during interviews on the legacies of war-time sexual violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, suggests that such ‘affective failure, and its subsequent reflection, can lead to a transformed, embodied knowledge of the research context’, allowing, for instance, the disruption of power relations in interview encounters. While in the former approach, emotions are acknowledged but then separated from the method, in the latter emotions and affect become part of the research method, accounting for researchers’ embodied knowing.

In the following, we unpack three central examples of the many ways in which emotions and affection influence fieldwork and resulting research outputs: the contested role of empathy in field research, ethnographic seduction, and the contentious issue of friendship in unequal field encounters. Each of these issues can lead to feelings of confusion or failure during fieldwork – emotions that shape the context of the fieldwork and are constantly in dialogue with the empirical, methodological, ethical, and theoretical contexts that make up our social-scientific research.

4.1 ‘Critical Empathy’ in Conflict-Related Fieldwork

In his reflections on an interview with ‘crudely misogynist and racist’ Australian military contractors in East Timor about their relations with local sex workers, Myrntinen (2020, p. 245) wonders how he could possibly heed the advice by a senior anthropologist that ‘successful ethnographic work requires having empathy with your interviewees’. His assumptions about sex workers as victims of exploitation by foreign peacekeepers were complicated after interviewing a sex worker, however, who was reminiscing about the previous, much larger and more lucrative UN intervention. ‘How’, he wonders, ‘could I do justice to her views, while simultaneously not glossing over her personal exploitation and broader systems of repression?’

(Myrntinen, 2020, p. 245). This example stands for a range of similar situations fieldworkers in areas of violent conflict may find themselves in (cf. Mc Cluskey, 2019). In the Colombia project, there was the tension between the knowledge about violent acts of former guerrillas against civilians and empathy with the marginalised societal position they now occupy. For his research in the Philippines, Nerve approached with open-mindedness the complex, if not conflicting, multiple positionalities of community members in the context of over 50 years of ongoing insurgency and counterinsurgency, which undeniably shape daily life in the community. Some 'leftist' community members, for instance, are nonetheless critical of the particular history and practices of the insurgent left movement that put civilians at risk. Others are elected government officials but are vocal of their opposition to state counterinsurgency practices that violate community and international norms and customary practices governing civilian protection during war.

The expectations, stereotypes, preconceptions, or experiences with which we go into the field will shape our encounters to some extent. In Berit's research in Colombia, the team found it much easier to imagine and conduct research with left-wing guerrilla groups, even though not approving of their violent practices, than with members of the infamous paramilitaries who at the height of the conflict were responsible for the great majority of massacres and other major human rights violations. This was even though the team members had their own personal insights and professional-academic knowledge about the arbitrariness with which young Colombians had often ended up in one or another armed group, be it through forced recruitment, for economic or self-protection reasons, or based on family, friendship, or romantic ties. Reflecting on such assumptions and biases in a processual and, where applicable, collective way (in a research team) is a prerequisite of conflict-related fieldwork (Arias López et al., 2021).

Yet, personal encounters in the field may also put into question our assumptions of who we would (not) be close to or feel empathy with. We may encounter victims of violent conflicts who we thought we would have empathy with but who we can feel little connection to because of their views or actions. Likewise, we might be surprised by the thoughtfulness or warmth of a violent actor who we thought we would despise. In Nerve's PhD fieldwork, he also visited Dabeiba in Antioquia, Colombia, to learn more about the ETCR built to facilitate the reintegration of ex-FARC members. Being in a relatively isolated, mountainous region and surrounded by ex-FARC veterans and heavily armed Colombian military, Nerve initially felt far from safe or at ease. It was Christmas time, so he spent one evening with former guerrillas and military officers wrapping gifts for the children and listening to Christmas carols under a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. At the holiday party, Nerve asked an older FARC veteran what 'peace' looked like to him, and the ex-guerrilla replied: 'This'. Growing up around similar family Christmas traditions in Manila, Nerve could not help but feel a sense of shared joy – if not peace, however one might define it. In the ETCR, he was hosted by an ex-FARC fighter in his 50s, who would regularly wake up around 5.30 am, lights still off, and wake Nerve up by calling him, with laughter and warmth, 'Filipino!' The ex-guerrilla always had

stories or jokes to share, lifting some of Nerve's anxieties of being in a transitory and contentious, if not limbo-like, space.

We may also find that some of our interlocutors make up stories to please us, in order to access the connections and opportunities of being associated with us, or the monetary compensation we may offer them for their time. This is what happened during Jennings (2020) research with sex workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her response to such incidents, which she terms 'critical empathy', is perhaps what Myrntinen's senior anthropologist meant when pointing to the central role of empathy in successful ethnographic research. 'There is', Jennings (2020, p. 223) contends, 'no contradiction between treating your sources with respect and understanding, while treating the information they give you with the same critical attention you give all other data sources'. It is Jennings' understanding of 'critical empathy' as 'listening to and empathizing with sources; engaging in dialogue, not least by opening yourself up to questions and challenges; and asking informed and difficult questions, while being alert to cues to back off, change tack or stop entirely; but not taking everything at face value', which we think can guide empathy not only in encounters with vulnerable subjects, but in all fieldwork encounters in areas of violent conflict.

4.2 *Ethnographic Seduction*

A central part to the 'critical' element in critical empathy is an awareness of what Robben (1996, p. 82) has called 'ethnographic seduction': 'the leading astray of an ethnographer from an intended path of knowledge and interpretation'. As Robben elaborates:

If trust and sincerity are so necessary for the successful outcome of a research project, then the ethnographer will go to lengths to achieve such favorable conditions and may unconsciously turn a blind eye to contrary signs. Room for circumvention has been created. The eager ethnographer might be kept away from culturally sensitive information under the false impression that the excellent rapport has opened all doors. The ethnographer may be seduced, may be directed away from his research objective under the impression of a good dialogic relationship.

What this observation points us to is the need for constant reflexivity and criticality in fieldwork-based research, in order not to contend ourselves with easy explanations or interpretations. We may feel closer to some interlocutors than others because of the amount of time we have spent with them, their narrative eloquence, or their supposed openness, sincerity, and generosity in offering us their insights, leading us to the false assumption that we actually know the social reality we study (cf. Mc Cluskey, 2019). This also includes the danger of taking a temporarily or spatially limited glimpse into the conflict area under study for the situation as a whole.

In Berit's project, for example, members of the Colombian team spent monthly week-long field visits in the communities under research. Visiting their interlocutors again a year after the project end, however, made clear that their research had only

offered a glimpse into an ongoing and highly volatile demobilisation and reincorporation process of former fighters, whose outcomes are far from clear. Family constellations and roles of power in the community had changed, it was rumoured that a couple of former community members had taken up arms again, while others had become victims of targeted killings. The team also found new information about some of their closest interlocutors. For example, they learned that two of them, an elderly local peasant and a former guerrilla fighter, were mother and daughter – information which the women had either not deemed important enough to mention, or kept from them deliberately, and which brought home the ethnographic seduction of believing to ‘truly know’ your participant–subjects and their context.

4.3 Friendship or Mutually Beneficial Partnership?

Such biases are not least linked to the question of whether friendship can (or indeed should) exist in research relationships. Bøås (2020, 2021) reminds us of the high inequality of relationships between researchers based in the Global North and their research partners and interlocutors in conflicted-affected areas of the Global South, but similar inequalities may also affect relationships between southern academics and marginalised communities in their own countries. Not least the fact that the outside researcher can leave, for example when the situation turns violent or otherwise dangerous, while the locals will stay behind, Bøås argues, leads to fundamentally different positionalities. He doubts that unconditional friendship can develop under such circumstances, no matter how much the outside researcher might crave it or how easy working with some people might feel.

Inequalities in research relationships are not inevitable, but they certainly can be made more mutually beneficial. In the Colombia project, separate budgets from UK and Colombian funders, respectively, managed by two principal investigators working in close collaboration, meant that the relationships between UK-based and Colombian researchers were relatively horizontal as they lacked the financial dependency characterising most North–South relationships. Gatekeepers among the former guerrilla fighters approached the team in a utilitarian way, making their communities’ participation in the project dependent upon the provisions of first-aid materials and training, which the team involving trained nurses was able to provide. Nerve, in his fieldwork in the Philippines, sought to acknowledge his positionality and privileges as a Filipino citizen pursuing his PhD in the USA, by immersing with an NGO based in the community which specialises in alternative sustainable agriculture based on Indigenous Peoples’ customs and practices. Working with the local NGO allowed him to participate in and observe daily activities in the community, and to help in some of the NGO’s tasks, including looking for potential funding and sharing technical skills such as the use of open-source digital mapping software.

These experiences are in line with Bøås’ suggestion that, to move beyond exploitation and extraction, Northern/privileged researchers should concentrate on building relationships which are mutually beneficial despite large structural inequalities.

This, he suggests, should be done in a non-normative, “‘step-by-step” approach where the guiding principle is a commitment to establish collaborative relationships across structural inequalities that lasts over time based on mutual interests and gains accepting that these are not necessarily equally divided’ (Bøås, 2021, p. 404).

5 Concluding Remarks

There is no single recipe or a secret ingredient for successful fieldwork in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, but there are useful questions researchers should address when preparing for such fieldwork, to better anticipate potential scenarios of losing control over their carefully designed pre-fieldwork research plan and negotiating tough emotions including confusion and a sense of personal, professional, or ethical failure (Bliesemann de Guevara & Bøås, 2020, pp. 271–281).

In this chapter, we used the notions of control, confusion, and failure as analytical lenses, to reveal some of the ways in which they interlink with research methods, ethics, and emotions. We focused on the complexity of navigating interviews and ethnographic participant observation amidst violent conflict to highlight challenges that researchers face in navigating relationships, time, and space, as well as suspicion, positionality, and security – contexts and concerns often leading to researchers re-thinking their research plans and feeling confused or failing in the field. Under ethics, we focused on dilemmas around the distinct, multiple, or conflicting social roles researchers may feel compelled to assume, whether as social worker or activist. We teased out some of these dilemmas as brought upon by an external environment of vulnerability and risks in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority, on the one hand, and asymmetrical power relationship between researcher and interlocutors, on the other. Finally, we attended to the importance of emotions as an internal context that has a major impact on data collection, analyses, and interpretations, alongside the theoretical, methodological, socio-political, and geographic contexts researchers operate within.

We focused on notions of control, confusion, and failure because in each of these dimensions of fieldwork in areas of violent conflict, the researcher has to spontaneously adjust or re-think their research methods, navigate fuzzy and messy ethical territories, and negotiate whether, when, where, or how to ‘toughen it up’, be emotionally neutral, or let difficult or positive emotions flow during the fieldwork encounter. In doing so, we argued that concerns around control, confusion, and failure emerging during fieldwork are linked to two interrelated dynamics: the complex violent conflict environment itself which poses challenges for research, and which clashes with academia’s expectations of ‘successful’ (read: controlled) research in universities which have yet to find ways to better support social-scientific research in highly volatile environments regardless of all its challenges.

At stake is a better understanding of fieldwork in areas of violent conflict and limited state authority as a set of dynamic and complex social, temporal, and spatial processes and encounters between the researcher and their interlocutors. More work

is needed to integrate knowledge of the challenges of fieldwork in such contexts into graduate training, mentorship, institutional protocols, governance, and accountability in ways that enable rather than curb research. Other possible areas for future studies may be oriented towards the question of how issues concerning control, confusion, and failure in fieldwork and data collection can be better acknowledged as part of data analyses and interpretation, manuscript preparation and revision, and knowledge production and dissemination, and what their implications are for our teaching, pedagogy, mentorship, and commitment towards positive social change.

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Chapter 25

Using Ethnography to Access, Understand, and Reflect on Video Observation of Violence



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1 Definition of the Phenomenon

Most researchers on violence never get to see the real deal. They only hear about violence when they talk to people about it afterward or they watch it from a safe distance, however preventing them from understanding how it unfolds. Advanced video technology and the increased presence of cameras in social life have become a game changer for research on violence because it allows researchers to see what people actually do as violence unfolds and to document this in reliable ways by rewinding the recordings and watching it with multiple and independent observers. As such, it becomes possible to capture behavior that people tend to forget in retrospect, such as movements, postures, emotional expressions, and touching, as well as the sequential patterns of these actions.

Recordings from public surveillance cameras (CCTV) have for example shown how people fight in public (Ejbye-Ernst, 2022; Levine et al., 2011), how bystanders intervene during fights (Philpot et al., 2020), and the way they console victims in the aftermath of robberies (Lindegaard et al., 2017). Recordings from smartphones

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have shown how these fights are initiated (Weenink, Tuma, et al., 2022b), and body-worn camera (BWC) footage has shown factors that influence law enforcement agents' use of force (Piza et al., 2022). These new data sources accommodate a long-standing request for better understandings of the interactional aspects of violence as formulated by existing studies (Athens, 2005; Felson, 1984; Luckenbill, 1977). Personal and environmental factors are important to consider when explaining the occurrence of violence, yet, even the most violent people, spending time in the most risk-prone places, rarely use violence (Collins, 2008; Lindegaard, 2017b). As such, we need to study the situations in order to improve the understanding of why violence happens in some situations while not in others.

Videos provide reliable information about what happens during violent encounters (Philpot et al., 2019). By having repeated access to actual interactions with a risk of violent escalation, it offers researchers the opportunity to break down these events in sequence of actions and analyze how specific actions associate with violence. Video clips can be paused, rewound, and played in slow motion—technical options that enable the researcher to observe repeatedly facial expressions, bodily actions, and the patterns in which they occur (Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2018). The access to the same video-recorded events for multiple researchers validate the interpretation of these events, increasing the reliability of research on violence because it does not rely on one individual's ability to decode and interpret what is going on in the heat of the moment. As such, the videos enable the researcher to take a role as a more distant observer of the event (Gold, 1957). This non-participating role helps to obtain an overview of what happens in situations that can be intense and chaotic while it does not provide the researcher with the bodily sensation experienced by researchers observing aggression and violence in the field (Lindegaard, 2017a, 2019).

The innovative methodological improvement of using videos to study violent interactions, however, involves a process of ethnographic fieldwork that is rarely reflected upon by researchers doing video analysis. In order to get access to videos, interpret them, and evaluate the results based on them, you need ethnographic skills such as gaining trust from collaborators and participation in everyday activities of the people you study in order to understand and interpret the context in which the violent interactions occur.

The research experiences included into this chapter refer to four projects we have conducted in the last 6 years using video observation of interactions with a risk of violent escalation. First project is a PhD project done by Camilla who studied BWC videos of violent interactions between ticket inspectors and ticketless passengers in public buses in Denmark. This project ran from 2018 to 2021. Second project was done by Marie who collected CCTV videos from the year 2017 to 2021 in the Netherlands with police officers. Third is an ongoing PhD project from 2021 by Lenneke who uses BWC videos to study de-escalation strategies of police officers in the Netherlands. Fourth is a PhD project that started in 2022 by Marly who uses CCTV videos to study what bystanders do when officers police the streets in the Netherlands. All projects are led by Marie.

In this chapter, we reflect on the importance of ethnographic skills in the different phases of conducting video-based research on violence. Specifically, we here

elaborate on these techniques in the phase of: (i) accessing videos in the first place, including persuading people to record incidences with their BWCs, and to save the right incidences recorded by CCTV cameras, (ii) understanding videos when watching them and developing behavioral inventories for the analysis, and (iii) reflecting on videos and the findings of the analysis when communicating the results to collaborators and stakeholders. These reflections include attention to confrontations with own emotions and ethical dilemmas related to the topic of aggression and violence, and to engaging with people who make recordings and get recorded themselves. We end the chapter with lessons learned for people who would like to do video observational studies based on CCTV and BWC footage.

2 Ethnographic Tools Used for Accessing Videos

As cameras have become a part of everyday life, video recordings have too. The Internet is conveniently full of videos of violent interactions, and this source has become popular among scholars interested in violence (Nassauer, 2018; Weenink et al., 2022a, b). However, with videos sourced from the Internet, you do not always know whether the interaction is staged or the video manipulated and your sampling criteria are limited by what people choose to put online. As such, it can be difficult to assess the reliability of what you learn about violence from online-sourced videos.

With videos obtained from BWCs worn by law enforcement agents, or CCTV obtained from authorities, you know that no manipulation has taken place and you know where the cameras are placed and who is carrying them (and as such what you might be missing). These real-life sources of video data, however, are challenging to access because they depend on collaborations with law enforcement agents to do the recordings or to zoom in with cameras and save the footage. As such, their selection of interactions that are recorded, and zoomed in upon, is per definition biased. The way and the extent to which they are biased, however, depend on how successful the researcher is in establishing trust and draw on key informants as collaborators on the project. In relation to BWC recordings, the main challenge in accessing data is to get the law enforcement agents to do recordings in the first place. In relation to CCTV footage, it is to make sure that the right types of interactions are included in the sample. Both processes involve various ethical issues that we reflect on in the end of the section.

2.1 *Persuading People to Record: A Case of BWC Videos*

In the first of our projects using BWC videos, Camilla studied violent interactions between ticket inspectors and ticketless passengers in public buses in Denmark to improve the understanding of why aggression and violence emerge in these situations (see Friis, 2023a, b; Friis et al., 2020; Friis & Lindegaard, 2022). The project

was initiated by Marie and based on a collaboration with a traffic company who wanted to reduce the risk of violent assaults against their employees out in the buses. For the purpose of the project, the inspectors were instructed to record whenever they encounter a passenger without a valid ticket in order to analyze the sequential order of how actions may shape the risk of conflict escalation. In total, we collected 1292 videos from BWCs worn on the ticket inspectors' uniforms. Additionally, to BWC videos, Marie and Camilla did participant observation in the buses for approximately one shift each and Camilla interviewed inspectors about their job. The collaboration about improving conflict management with the company started when Marie met the ticket inspectors' manager during the shooting of a TV documentary with Marie participating as an expert. The management quickly saw the value of the research project and was onboard; yet, this was not the same for the inspectors:

"Why would I want to record any of my work for you to look at? It is bad enough that my employer is watching what I am doing." Sandra is smiling while she is saying this.¹ She is one of the ticket inspectors taking part in the project #1 on public transport, and the recordings she talks about are with her BWC. The cameras have recently been installed as a part of the uniform for the ticket inspectors. The idea is that passengers might behave less intimidating if they are being filmed by inspectors. Sandra does not believe in this preventive effect. In fact, she says that intimidation is a part of the job and if you cannot deal with it, you need to find another job. She also thinks that the cameras primarily are a management instrument to control employees and punish them when they go too far in installing order on the bus.

Marie is shadowing Sandra during a shift to understand her work and to figure out in what ways she is using her camera, and more specifically, what she might exclude from her recordings. She is one of five inspectors who we later encounter does not accept backing down when citizens escalate a situation to avoid being fined. Instead, she insists that exactly that kind of citizens need to be punished with a fine, and she works in pairs of colleagues who agree with her on such an approach. They also agree on never turning on their camera because they know that their manager disagree with their approach. Most of the time, however, Sandra is joking with passengers. Marie joins her during the full shift, following her in and out of buses, standing next to Sandra when she is checking passengers. During these observations, she wears her own clothes and nobody pays attention to her, as it is common that inspectors chat to passengers and people they meet on the street. After hours of observing Sandra on the bus, Marie's reply to her question about why it is important that she records for her is that she needs to record for the project because if we understand how she is de-escalating conflicts with passengers, other people can learn it too, and then she is helping her colleagues. As such, Marie encouraged the inspectors to participate in the project by emphasizing the importance of their perspective.

¹Throughout the chapter, we use pseudonyms and sometimes exclude specific types of information about the projects to ensure anonymity for the participants and secure the ongoing research process.

A few weeks later, Marie and Camilla attend a staff meeting with all the inspectors. Sandra approaches her afterward to say that she started recording her work. When we present the first results from the project to her manager and colleagues, we ask her to share her experiences. In the end, 11 ticket inspectors voluntarily participated in interviews about their job. The interviews were collected with informed consent given at the onset of the interview when the audio recorder was on and offered the inspectors the possibility to share their perspectives about their job. This is an example of a collaboration we set up in order to get access to BWC recordings of conflicts. When Marie walked around the bus with Sandra, she thought we would never succeed in persuading her to record incidences. The job performance of inspectors was, among other things, evaluated by their employer, based on the number of fines they were issuing and they experienced their manager to control rather than protect them. By shadowing them, it became clear that the inspectors experienced the newly installed BWCs as a tool of control rather than a safety measurement. It was in this tension that our project took place, and we needed to balance the interests of both the inspectors and the manager to succeed in getting access to the videos.

By investing time and showing sincere interest and commitment in understanding the work from the perspective of the inspectors, literally standing next to them on the bus while they were checking tickets, we created enough rapport for them to trust that the recordings would be kept away from the employer and used for a purpose that would benefit the inspectors. This made even reluctant inspectors like Sandra willing to collaborate. In this process, we provided them with a guarantee of full anonymity in the process of analysis and presentations of the results emphasizing that we were not interested in individuals but interactions. In Lenneke's project #3, starting 3 years later, we also collected BWC recordings, provided the participants with a guarantee of anonymity, and additionally asked them for informed consent to collect and analyze the footage.

Getting access to BWC videos in Denmark, and later in the Netherlands too, required building long-term trust relationships with the people pushing the buttons to record on the cameras but also with the management allowing us to access their employees. Crucial for those relationships was participation in their daily work, empathetic positioning toward the dilemmas they were facing in their job, transparent motivations for the collaboration, continuously contact throughout the project to establish trust, and involvement in the communication of results.

2.2 Persuading People to Record the Right Things: A Case of CCTV Videos

Project #2 focuses on the role of bystanders in public conflicts, and the data collection involved training the operators sitting in the CCTV monitor rooms to save conflicts of varying intensity, ranging from verbal arguments to severe violence

involving weapons and kicks to the head. Brian is one of the officers that got assigned to support Marie during a part of the collection of CCTV footage at one of the police stations in the Netherlands. In their usual working procedure, the operators would usually not pay attention to the low-intensity conflicts and would potentially ignore the recordings including police officers. Thus, for the project's sample selection focused on conflicts ranging from low-intensity disputes to severe violence, it was key that the operators became familiar with the project and felt committed to save the right kinds of encounters. In the beginning of the project, Marie spent many hours drinking coffee with Brian in the office, telling him about her research interest and watching different recorded incidences while listening to his extensive knowledge about what is happening on the street. He knew exactly where to look for the incidences we were interested in and was as such the perfect key informant for our study. Brian understood the importance of accessing a variety of situations independent on the conflict's intensity and independent on who was involved in the incidences and who used violence.

From the beginning, Marie shares her publications and media references to her work with Brian, and when she comes by the station, he has read everything and has questions about the theories, method, and the different sample selection strategies that we use. Therefore, he also knows the importance of the right sample strategy. This understanding of the work we were doing, and the trust we built up through coffee and conversations, became crucial for our ability to access the right videos. The importance of investing in relationships to ensure access to the right video recordings was confirmed in later projects where a top-down dictated data collection without the time to build trust with the operators with access to the videos turned out problematic for the data collection. Crucial for getting access to the right CCTV videos was to spend time regularly in the monitor room, observing the working practices, and learning from the operators. To enter the operator room, we needed an official security clarification and had to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that we would not share information about investigations and incidences discussed with the public. During the data collection, we spend about 6 hours per week, sitting next to the operators and drinking coffee with them. Talking to them about the research, and as such involving them as key informants, who knew what was relevant for the research, was a way of gaining trust but also access to incidences relevant for the research project.

The experiences from project #2 and other CCTV data collections show that investment in relationships with key informants, by sharing ideas and results of the research, and spending time to build up trust by participating in the work of municipal employees and police officers watching and saving footage, were key for gaining access to data in the first place, and for gaining access to the right incidences. Particularly involving the professionals in the focus of the research enabled them to guard the data collection process. In our experience, the best approach was to engage closely with people on the ground, and as such approach them as collaborators.

2.3 *Ethical Concerns When Accessing Videos*

One of the ethical concerns in accessing videos is that the decision to engage in the research is sometimes made by employers or people in higher hierarchical positions than the people recording and saving the footage for the research project. This dependency potentially influences employees' positioning toward others in the organization when having to decide on what CCTV footage to save and give access to for researchers to observe. In the case of accessing BWC recordings from ticket inspectors, we encountered two ethical dilemmas: one related to voluntary participation, and the other related to participants potentially influencing the interactions that we were interested in because of the request to record.

First, a challenge was that the employees were told to do recordings as a part of their job description, i.e., the management made it mandatory to record for the research project and it would be considered a cause for dismissal if the inspectors did not record any ticket-fining events. Thus, the video data collection was on paper not based on voluntary participation but on a collaboration with the traffic company who gave instructions to their employees. The traffic company wanted to improve the work environment for the inspectors by reducing the risk of violence, yet some inspectors were questioning this ambition and felt that a work task was imposed on them. The overall ambition of the project was to improve the employees' conflict management to avoid escalation, but previous workplace conflicts and organizational restructuring may influence the management and employees' perception and motivation for participation. To ensure that the inspectors could always reach out privately if they had questions or concerns, Marie and Camilla made available their contact information in the inspectors' meeting room. Further, Camilla made monthly visits to the traffic company to collect the BWC videos. In this phase, she ensured to be present in their meeting room at the time of the shift change between the two operating inspection teams to encounter as many employees as possible. This provided continuous encounters with opportunities for the inspectors to talk and question the research project to gain rapport (Taylor et al., 2015). In the end, no inspectors would face repercussions by not recording for the research project, as it would not be mentioned to the management if employees did not make any recordings.

Second ethical challenge concerning accessing BWC videos in project #1 was that the inspectors were aware that their actions would be watched when they pressed the button to record. This could have affected how they dealt with conflicts—either by downplaying their routine behavior in ticket-fining events, or by overdoing it. The latter turned out potentially to be the case with one inspector, as illustrated in the field notes by Camilla after she did a brief follow-up interview with the inspectors Bastian, Poul, and Danny, a year after video data collection:

Bastian asks whether some of the videos will be used so they can talk from them. I explain that they cannot, because they are only to be used for the project, and that they have collected the videos with a guarantee that no one else would watch them. Bastian then says that he sometimes “acted a bit,” or did a bit extra to incite situations when he recorded. He sometimes tried to make someone react a bit because nothing would happen otherwise. I make some inquiries into how. Poul and Danny say that they do not think that anyone else

did that. It was an awkward situation, and I did not know how I should approach it. It is problematic if he has done that deliberately at work.

The notes from the follow-up interview highlight the ethical concern of the project's impact on ticket inspection, as the inspector revealed that he had changed his behavior in some events because of the project. This exemplifies the problem of participants staging events because they know the exact scope of analysis (Fine, 1993; Gobo, 2008; Taylor et al., 2015). The information from the inspector did not come until a year after video data collection had ended, and therefore, it was not possible to act upon. However, it left a feeling of discomfort with Camilla because it meant that he might have acted in a manner only to stir things up, which was opposite the project's aim to improve conflict management. Here, a reassuring matter was that Poul and Danny both explained that they did not think anyone other than Bastian had done "a bit extra," and based on her knowledge about the inspectors and the videos she had watched, this did not seem to be a general issue.

3 Ethnographic Tools for Understanding Videos

Video observation is excellent for understanding actual behavior in real-life interaction but typically provides little information about the motivations for the actions observed, the experiences of the people engaging, or their actual perceptions during the interaction (Lindegaard & Bernasco, 2018). Further, it provides little understanding of people's meaning-making processes (Keesman, 2022) and the way that the interaction relates to previous experiences, future positioning, and expectations. As such, video observation alone provides limited understanding of the context in which the interaction occurs, even though such information is important for the understanding and interpretation of the observed actions. One way of circumventing these limitations is to combine video and participant observation. By first participating in activities similar to the ones observed on the videos, the researcher gets an understanding of what is at stake for the people involved, including what it feels like to be in the situations, what their perspectives are on site, as well as potential motivations for the actions observed.

Through participant observation, the researcher gets to understand how previous experiences in conflicts might influence observed behavior, how people observed talk about their actions with their peers and colleagues, e.g., how they define aggression and violence, and what they see and feel during interactions. Such information provides knowledge on the way cultural repertoires, embodied by the people observed, shape how they act in conflict interactions (Friis, 2023a; Keesman, 2022). As such, using fieldwork to improve the understanding of the perspectives and definitions of for example police officers, inspectors, or gang members is a valuable addition to video observation as it provides access to the meaning and context pertained to the conflict interactions that we study. This includes drawing on our own field experiences that offer the possibility to include the emotional tensions of

conflict interactions and the way stress shapes perspectives during conflicts that are not clear from the video footage but experienced in situ.

In the following, we provide two examples based on fieldwork experiences from project #3 and project #4 to illustrate how participant observations helped to understand and interpret the videos. These examples show the importance of experiencing the types of incidences observed with the videos in order to understand the way aggression and violence are defined, and illustrate the difference between the perspective of a CCTV camera and the one of an observer present during a police shift.

3.1 Emotional Experiences in the Heat of the Moment: The Case of BWC Videos

In project #3 about police officers' conflict management, Lenneke uses BWC recordings to examine the situational aspects of police-citizen interactions to improve the understanding of how officers can minimize the risk of conflict escalation when enforcing law on citizens in the Netherlands. Additionally, she uses participant observation that includes ride-along during morning, afternoon, and night shifts with police officers of various teams in the Netherlands. It also includes observations and participation in a 5-day police-training course on de-escalatory communication. She uses participant observation to establish rapport with the recording officers and to understand the officers' perspectives, for example their definitions of aggression and violence, including the bodily experience of engaging in these encounters. Further, she uses participant observation to get a better understanding of when the officers would press to record incidences and thus illustrate how her sample might be biased by this decision-making process. However, participant observations also turned out to be valuable for understanding what it feels like to be involved in situations, which may not be captured on the recordings but are important for understanding the decision-making of officers. This realization emerged by analyzing video recordings of herself present in two different situations, and comparing these with her bodily memories and fieldwork notes on how she experienced being there. In the first situation, she was on patrol with officers who responded to a dispatch call:

I am in the back of the car with two police officers when we get a dispatch call. The call comes from a police station some hours away from where we are, and I notice the officers find this a bit vague. The dispatch call is that an ex-boyfriend is on his way to a woman, possibly with weapons, and the question is if we can check on the woman and see what the situation is. Once we are at the woman's house, I notice a lot of confusion. The woman is confused that the police are at her house and immediately is on edge. The police officers are surprised as they are there for her safety, but the woman is not cooperating. At one point, the conversation turns into a discussion, and I feel tension throughout the conversation. I am convinced that the woman will snap at the officers. Although this did not happen, the conversation escalated into a discussion, and the woman refused to answer the officers' questions or cooperate.

When Lenneke was present in the situation, she felt a certain tension throughout the interaction. Yet, when looking at the recording of the incident, she did not observe the intensity that she felt. Instead, the interaction appeared calmer than how she felt. When Lenneke got the opportunity to participate in de-escalatory communication training at the police academy as part of project #3, she got to further explore this emotional tension when managing contested encounters. Here, the officers have to act out how they will manage tense conflict interactions. In the second situation, which informed Lenneke on the emotional tensions and decision-making process, she took part in training where she acted as an officer that had to negotiate a hostage situation with a citizen:

An officer and I are walking down the hallway of a building where driving tests are held, and we hear shouting from another room. The officer knocks on the door, announces that we are from the police, and we walk through the only entry point in a closed room. In the middle of the room, a man sits at a table, and a woman stands behind him. She is holding a knife to his throat. Upon seeing this, the officer immediately puts his hand on his weapon and tells the woman to put the knife down. I notice I get even more nervous. I don't carry weapons, I don't wear a uniform, and I most certainly am not a trained police officer. However, this is the situation I now have to deal with together with the officer standing next to me. So while he continues the conversation, I try to steady my nerves.

We learn that the woman failed her driving test for the fifth time and that the man sitting in front of her is the examiner. She demands that he lets her pass the test, but he cannot do this as it is in the system already. At this point, I take over the conversation. While talking, I notice I am oddly aware of what I say and do. Everything I now have to do is the opposite of my instincts. I need to have an open body posture while being uncomfortable, remain calm though my heart is racing, and actively pay attention to what the woman says while everything in me tells me I need to get out. I have never been in a crisis situation, but I now have to act in one.

Although it might seem weird, I start to empathize with the woman. For her, a lot depended on her getting her driver's license. She needed it to get a job, and now she feels like she has failed and consequently lost perspective. I don't think she truly wants to hurt the man in front of her, but it is an unfortunate combination of the wrong circumstances, and this was her breaking point. I say something along the lines that I get where she comes from, but this backfired. "*You know nothing. You don't understand. How could you understand?*" she snaps at me, waving the knife. "*Then explain it to me, I want to understand*" I say. Luckily, she continues talking.

We come to the mutual understanding that she has to go to the police station with us, and we will figure out what to do from there. I ask her to put the knife on the table behind her. She hesitates but then agrees and puts the knife away. "*Thank you*" I say. The woman then turns and looks at me, "*now what*" she asks me. "*End case*" the trainer answers.

In both situations, Lenneke used participant observations, first as observer in an actual contested encounter and later as officer in an acted hostage situation to understand the tension that officers might experience in such situations. This information made her aware that video-recorded situations might appear of low intensity when being watched from a distance but the people involved might nevertheless experience them as highly intense and stressful.

Fieldwork reminds video observation scholars not to neglect the tensions experienced in low-intense conflicts that may not appear escalatory on camera. It also

made Lenneke aware about the diversity of situations that police officers have to deal with, and as such about the necessity to analyze the conflict dynamics of each subtype of police-citizens encounters rather than assuming that escalation occurs according to similar patterns across the variety of situations that they deal with.

3.2 Adjusting Definitions to Improve Categories Used for Analyzing Videos: The Case of CCTV

In project #4 Marly combines interviews, participant observation and video observation of CCTV footage from the Netherlands to improve the knowledge about bystander behavior in public and how police officers experience and react to bystander behavior. She uses interviews to provide insights into the way officers experience bystanders in their daily work and understand the categories they use to distinguish these experiences. Participant observation is used to explore the officers' experiences of citizen and bystander encounters on the street, to understand what officers are able to perceive and interpret in the heat of the moment. These methods are used to inform the video analysis, which aims at distinguishing patterns of officer actions who perform arrests and police action after a medical emergency. Further, project #4 aims to examine the reactions of bystanders to police performance in both an enforcement role and first responder service role.

There is almost no academic literature about bystanders of police action, and as such no knowledge about how often bystanders are active, what type of actions bystanders perform, and what actions are viewed as challenging or helping in the eyes of police officers. Thus, Marly did interviews with officers and participant observations to get a better understanding of how officers perceive bystanders, what kinds of behavior they focus on and as such what kinds of behaviors she should make sure to include in the video analysis. In the course of the participation, she realized how difficult it is to understand conflict dynamics when actually being a part of them, highlighting the importance of drawing on videos for such analyses. Additionally, during participant observations she became aware of the importance of creating safe working spaces for officers, which became important for interpreting their actions in the video-recorded situations.

In the following, Marly describes how she struggled with understanding what was happening during participant observations in project #4, and how she had wished to have recordings of the incidences rather than being emerged in the situation herself:

I am joining two officers on their night shift in the nightlife area of a big Dutch city. Around 5.00 pm., the clubs are closing, and partygoers are exiting the club, making the streets crowded. The people in the street are not going home right away, and there was this tension that is hard to describe. Multiple officers were present and attentive, ready to intervene in case something happened.

Suddenly there were several fights going on, and because around 40 people were out on the street it was a very chaotic situation. Even though it happened right under my eyes, I did not see who instigated the fight, and as a group of around 7 people were pushing and pulling, it was unclear to distinguish interveners from conflict parties. The police officers had the same challenge. They separated the parties and arrested four people, yet friends of the arrested people yelled: “He was only trying to help! Let him go!”

If I would have witnessed this in my free time, I would have walked away immediately, but now I needed to follow the officers closer to the conflict. Opposite of my own instinct, many people stayed to watch what was happening. At this moment, officers are telling the crowd to leave, but they only take one step back and still form an audience waiting for the entertainment to continue. Subsequently, two officers on horses force the crowd to move away.

I felt my heart was racing, but I was also very focused on two things. First, I constantly needed to think about how to position myself. On the one hand, I needed to stay close to the officers, to see everything but also because otherwise nothing differentiated me from the crowd that needed to leave. On the other hand, I needed to think about my own safety. One officer advised me always to have my back to a wall or object. But when I stood with my back to the police van, they just arrested a resisting suspect that needed to be moved into the van. Second, I wanted observe and remember everything that was happening. I would only witness this event once, and in the midst of all the fuss, I was not able to write things down.

While officers were still busy with the conflict parties of the previous fight, 1 meter from where I was standing someone hit another person in the face, and his nose was bleeding heavily. While I was super close and I saw it happen, I was not sure whether the perpetrator used his fist or his foot. I heard others say he used his hand, but I saw his leg moving up as well.

After experiencing this situation, Marly wished she could have watched the CCTV footage from this night of fieldwork. She felt that she had missed much of what had happened and constantly doubted whether she had interpreted all that happened correctly. Participant observation relies on researchers’ ability to accurately observe and document what happens in the course of a conflict interaction, and in Marly’s experience, this is impossible when being onsite—an experience supported by other research (Morrison et al., 2016). This experience informed her video analysis later by being sensitive to the fact that CCTV footage provides a privileged bird-eye view that the people on the ground do not have. As such, the video analysis needs to stay sensitive to what people observed were actually able to know when engaging in certain actions. Instead, the bird’s eye view that the CCTV camera angle provides, allows for a better overview of the situation than any person present in the situation could have.

In the following fieldwork notes for project #4 Marly describes, how participant observations made her aware of the importance of creating a safe working space:

The officers talk a lot about the importance of creating a safe working space. This seems to be the first priority. They are keen on distancing bystanders from the scene, sometimes by blocking areas with their bodies, vehicles, or tape. Anyone who gets too close by is seen as a threat because they want a safe working space. Big groups of people make a situation more chaotic and threatening, even when people are helping or just watching. It is hard to distinguish bystanders to conflict parties, and it is even harder to guess people’s intentions.

Watching the videos after the experiences from her fieldwork made Marly sensitive to understand actions of officers as potentially related to creating safe working spaces. Without this information, Marly would not have seen walking or standing close to an officer as a significant act, yet for police officers the meaning of distance is closely related to safety. In this way, insights from the fieldwork play an important role in constructing meaningful categories for the coding of videos, which enhances the validity of video observational conclusions (Lindegard & Bernasco, 2018).

3.3 Ethical Dilemmas When Understanding Videos

A few ethical dilemmas are worth mentioning when reflecting on how ethnographic methods can be used to understand video-recorded interactions. One is the definition of aggression and violence used in the video analysis compared to what is observed and experienced during participation. In all the projects described in this chapter, fieldwork experiences raised questions about the definition of aggression and violence in the videos. When Lenneke and Marly watched the videos after participant observations, they noticed that their perception of aggression differed from the analytical definition. For example, in other video observational research projects, the lowest level of aggression is aggressive gesturing, such as pointing the index finger at someone (Ejbye-Ernst et al., 2022). However, during participant observations, Lenneke and Marly noticed that the officers experience this as “part of the job” and not as aggression. Although an objective measure of aggression and violence is crucial, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the experience can differ per person and situation. These reflections raise questions about what kind of analytical categories we want to draw on and the extent to which we should incorporate the emic perspectives of our research participants.

Another ethical dilemma is related to participating in situations where aggression and violence are taking place. In several of the projects described in this chapter, the researchers became witnesses to various forms of force, and in a few cases, they were called upon as bystanders to intervene. One such situation was when Marie witnessed officers arguing aggressively with a citizen when she followed them on patrol in the Netherlands during fieldwork for project #2. The citizen got arrested and the officer grabbed the person by the jacket and pushed him toward the wall. The citizen turned toward her to ask for support with the words “Why are you not doing anything? You must also see that this is not right.” Only months later she realized that this situation was indeed not right but in the heat of the moment she doubted whether the force was legitimate or actually too excessive. However, intervening in the work of officers, even if the actions were not right, was impossible in the heat of the moment, and even sharing impressions afterward was tricky because it could potentially damage the trust she was building up with officers.

4 Ethnographic Tools for Reflecting on Videos

In order to evaluate the validity and generalizability of our video observational results, we engaged in discussions about what we saw on the videos with the people involved in the projects to reflect on our findings. Thus, in the process of reflecting and communicating results, we used ethnographic tools, such as asking participants to comment and add to findings, providing alternative perspectives, and reflecting on questions of generalizability. This process of reflection was a continuous dialogue throughout the projects where findings from the videos were sometimes brought into the interaction with participants, who then reflected on the results and provided new perspectives on their own experiences and what we saw on the videos. This helped us to gain an understanding of the context and how to disseminate results in this context. Further, this process informed what we looked at in the videos but also what we looked at in the dialogue with participants. In what follows we illustrate this process in relation to CCTV footage analysis in project #4 on bystanders in police work, and in relation to BWC footage in project #1 on ticket inspectors.

4.1 *Using Video Analysis to Reorient Focus of Participants: A Case of CCTV*

When Marly started engaging with police officers during participant observations in project #4, it was remarkable that in some cases their perspective on bystanders was quite negative. The idea of the ‘helping bystander’ was not recognized, especially in conflict situations. This was confirmed when speaking to police officers saving the CCTV footage in the control room, as illustrated with the reaction below from an officer during our first meeting:

Helping bystanders? I have never seen that. I am afraid you are at the wrong address. In [city] bystanders are not helping. They are just watching or standing in the way. I think you need to change your focus or go to another city for your study.

Our response to this comment was that we had studied this in four different cities with video observation already and the results consistently showed that bystanders take an active role in de-escalating street fights. By the end of the conversation, the same police officer remarked:

I must admit that you got me thinking. Now that you ask me, I do actually recall incidences of helping bystanders. I just never looked at it in this way.

This understanding of bystanders and the officer’s ability to reflect on his own experiences, made Marly include both the question of troubling and helping bystanders during her interviews. By being able to say that bystanders also take helping roles, when officers expressed skepticism, they started to reflect and open up for new perspectives on their own experiences. As such, the dialogue between video observation and the experiences with creating safe working spaces generated

new insights that could not have been achieved without the dialogue. The results of the video analysis made the officers look at the context of their work in new ways and the results of the participant observations and interviews made Marly look at the videos in new ways. This process of reflection that Marly uses in her fieldwork ensures that attention to the local context and perspectives of the police officers will improve how the research results will resonate and be relevant for collaborators.

4.2 The Importance of Anonymity When Communicating Results: A Case of BWC

In the process of reflecting on research findings and communicating them to broader audiences, a challenge when working with BWC videos is how to ensure anonymity of the participants collecting the recordings for the project. Participants share hundreds of recordings from their work–life that allow researchers to assess and analyze their unedited and unfiltered behaviors (Chillar et al., 2021). This makes it paramount for researchers to continuously reflect on and ensure the anonymity of the participants who can face serious consequences if they are identified by their manager or colleagues. For example, this raises issues of the amount of demographic information that is possible to disclose about a participant, given that it may be easy for management or colleagues to identify participants based on a few characteristics.

In project #1, 19 ticket inspectors participated. They were six women and 13 men who were of different ages, had different ethnic origins, and had varying years of employment in the company. This left a small sample of participants who may easily be recognized by colleagues and management in the presentation of results from the project. Furthermore, the project involved interviews with the inspectors about their perspective on their job. This included negative perspectives about the management and attitudes about how to manage conflicts that did not necessarily fluctuate with the management’s instructions. To ensure that inspectors could not be identified by colleagues or the management by comparing actions and quotes across analyses, the inspectors were always given different pseudonyms in the analyses to avoid that cross-readings would give away who said and did what. This was a way to ensure the inspectors’ anonymity in the continuous presentation of results from the project.

4.3 Ethical Dilemmas Reflecting on Videos

In reflecting on and communicating results, a dilemma is how much to say about things that are not going well, particularly when employees have had to make decisions about what incidences recorded on CCTV to save, or recorded themselves and

others in vulnerable and hidden moments. Writing about these incidences is difficult because the text might jeopardize the employees but not writing about them is also unethical because it involves important topics like injustice, discrimination, and police violence. By engaging with participants during fieldwork, it becomes more difficult to create distance from their perspectives and analyze the videos without taking side and privilege for instance the perspective of officers and inspectors on behalf of that of citizens and passengers. While taking side is necessary throughout the process of collecting data, creating distance in order to reflect on categories and create an analytical view is important later in the process.

This emotional engagement and understanding of the people you engage with in person is on the one hand a strength, as it prevents the perspective of scientific superiority, but could on the other hand prevent reflection. Privileging the perspective of participants is maybe also as a way of honoring their practical experiences and expressing respect for their job. However, distance is necessary for a reliable and unbiased analysis. When reflecting on videos, it is important to balance these two perspectives in order to critically reflect, while also taking the experiences of the participants into account.

5 Approvals, Researcher Safety, and Data Storage

Working with videos containing intense, uncomfortable, and sometimes violent situations involve both emotional, ethical, and legal precautions. When collecting personal information from a public space, we follow the principles of the American Sociological and Psychological Associations Code of Ethics (2010, 2018). Project #1 on violent interactions in public transport in Denmark was approved by The Danish Data Protection Agency. The approval included that video data were securely stored in a room and place with a lock and with a confidential password only known to the people involved in the project. Project #2 on public conflicts in the Netherlands was approved by an ethical review board at the University of Amsterdam. The video collection was a part of the usual working flow except the registration of low severity conflicts. The public prosecutor and the national police provided permission to use the data for scientific purposes under strict conditions for storage (storage procedure is described further below) and analysis. This meant no identification of individuals other than visual cues and no integrated analysis with information about individuals from other sources.

Project #3 on police officers' conflict management in the Netherlands was positively reviewed by the Ethics Committee for Legal and Criminological Research (CERCO) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Similar to project #2, the public prosecutor and the national police also provided permission to use the BWC footage for scientific purposes under strict conditions. Lastly, officers voluntarily participated in the research and they signed an informed consent form providing permission for the use of their BWC footage for the research project. Project #4 on the role of bystanders in police work was positively reviewed by the CERCO, the ethical

board of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The questions raised by the ethical board mainly focused on the risks of participant observation during police shifts and in response the research team made a plan to minimize the safety risks. The videos were selected from a list of all incidences over a period. The incident number and camera number for all arrests and medical emergencies were noted down and shared with someone from the police who secured the relevant videos on a hard disk.

To ensure physical safety during the fieldwork for project #3 and #4, the research team made a plan beforehand. Moreover, the police also have their own protocols in place for when people walk along. At the start of the shift, Lenneke and Marly would discuss this with the officers. The most important agreement is that the officers would say when they thought a situation was unsafe and instruct Lenneke and Marly about what to do. Depending on the situation, this could mean that they had to wait in the car or walk back to the police station. Although the latter never happened, it was important to discuss so both parties knew what to expect. In addition, Lenneke and Marly were responsible for their own safety, and they would only go along with the officers as long as they felt safe, regardless of the officers' judgment. If this was the case, the agreement was that they would walk back to the police car and wait for the officers.

During some walk along shifts, Lenneke and Marly also had to wear stab- and bulletproof vests, although this differed per police unit. From a physical safety perspective, it is a clear advantage to wear a police vest. However, from a research perspective, it might be seen as a disadvantage to wear the police vest as citizens will now associate the researcher with the police. Regardless of this disadvantage, this was always discussed at the start of the shift and Lenneke and Marly followed the police's instructions. Importantly, the police also always made sure to have an extra metal-plated vest in the back of the car, even when the researchers would not wear the stab- and bulletproof vests.

In all four projects, the video data are stored in secure drives or computers that comply with the host institution's data protection policy. The video clips from project #1 were transferred from the traffic company on an encrypted portable drive to the university, where the footage was stored on a secure drive in accordance with the university's data protection policy. When observing videos, Camilla had to ensure that no one else could see or hear the videos. The video clips from project #2, #3, and #4 were transported on an encrypted hard disk in a sealed bag, and stored and analyzed in a Safe Analytical Lab detached from the Internet, situated in a room without windows, and only accessible by security approved staff, prohibited from using their phone. None of the videos, even when anonymized, were allowed to be displayed outside the Secure Analytical Lab, and any researcher working with the material had to become approved and included in the official permission lent by the public prosecutor office.

To manage the emotional risks and strains of observing violence and conflict behavior, we take advantage of being part of a research group that studies real-life violence, and frequently engage in each other's fieldwork experiences, analyses, and reflections. This has the benefit of ensuring continuous conversations and discussions about the data that we are watching among peers who understand the type

of data that we are working with. Being able to share emotional thoughts and experiences after fieldwork experiences or after watching an unpleasant video is crucial. The videos sometimes have comical elements, and laughing together can help cope with the work we do. However, it is important to be aware that too much normalization can prevent people from sharing their emotions, as they might feel it is the norm to talk about the videos in a casual way. We use joint video observation sessions to watch, discuss, and analyze videos together. Besides offering valuable analytical insights, these sessions strengthen the somewhat distanced observer role that we have as video observation researchers. Our analytical view on the videos, e.g., whether a person moves forward or backward, including extreme attention to details, makes the sometimes horrific scenes more bearable. As such, this enables us to observe the interactions out of a scholarly interest focused on de-constructing the interactional process of violent encounters with less emotional attention to the real-life implications of violent behavior. Given the strict safety precautions of how to store and observe the video data, we only work with video data in the designated work setting, which also helps to downplay the emotional tension and discomfort that can be experienced from watching violence.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

First lesson learned is that it is important to combine fieldwork with video observation in order to provide contextual information about conflict interactions, which is not caught on camera. This improves the interpretation of the video data. Video observation allows researchers to study actual behavior without interference of subjective experiences in situ, but lacks information about the background of the individuals, the motivation for their actions, their perspectives, and the lived experience of the interaction. Assessing actions based on a video observation without insights into the internal emotions that the people involved might feel during the interaction makes it easier to assess people's performance and the sequences of action. Yet, to understand the complexity of the interactions that we study, and the way that the individuals make sense of them, it is an important part of analyzing video data in a meaningful and valid way. This includes obtaining information about the formal rules and guidelines that may be crucial to understand the routine work practices of employees observed on camera. We therefore suggest doing participant observation to improve the understanding of what happens in the videos.

Second lesson learned relates to the navigation in the field while collecting video footage. If the main purpose of the study is to observe and analyze video-recorded interactions then it is important to be focused on this data collection process. As we have argued in this chapter, it is important to collect information about the field of interest and the context of the study. However, given that a main interest is to analyze video-recorded interactions, it is important to know when you have collected a satisfactory amount of contextual information. This can also make it easier for you

to maintain the role of observer compared to participant, as we argue is a valuable strength of video observation. As a common issue in ethnographic research is balancing the social relationship with participants with the risk of becoming too close with your subject of interest, this can be tricky when you later have to assess their actions in situations where they may act in an improper or wrong manner.

Thus, we suggest collecting all the contextual information from participants in the phase of video data collection before the process of data analysis. This prevents the analysis from reproducing the perspectives of the participants and allows the researcher, for example, to define aggression and violence analytically, rather than based on participants' understandings. For example, it is important to understand how police officers define aggression and violence but it is also important to create analytical distance from their definitions and acknowledge them as one of many perspectives on the topic of police violence. As such, more descriptive and neutral analytical categories can help generating insights and discussions about these topics without privileging one perspective over another.

Third lesson learned concerns research based on BWC videos collected from participants. Here, it is important to take the concerns of the participants seriously and address them in every possible way because you rely on their willingness to participate to collect video data. This does not mean that every concern may be accommodated, but giving voice to the participants is an important part of the video data collection. Combining video observation with interviews can be a way of providing participants a voice and allow them to explain their actions and thoughts about their job and organizational policies. As such, besides being an important data source, the interviews are also important to give the employees a voice in a research project.

7 Conclusion

Video observation based on CCTV and BWC footage involves a range of ethnographic tools and dilemmas behind the scene that are rarely reflected on in research papers. Even though we argue that video observation is superior to participant observation when the purpose is reliably to analyze violent interactions and behavior, fieldwork methods are crucial to get access to data in the first place and to understand and reflect on videos. First, investing time in participants and gatekeepers to gain trust give access to better video data. Second, participant observation improves the understanding of what we cannot see or feel on the videos, which informs the analytical categories that we use in the video analysis. Third, the fieldwork methods help to understand how to disseminate results from video observation with attention to the local context and perspectives of stakeholders, which consequently, improves the ecology of producing knowledge that is beneficial and relevant for collaborators and the general public.

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Part V
The Cyber

Chapter 26

Researching Cybersecurity Governance: Insights from Fieldwork with Cybersecurity Experts and End-Users



Cristina Del-Real  and Tommy van Steen 

1 Untangling Cybersecurity Governance

Cyberspace stands as humanity's most complex creation. The vast deployment of millions of kilometres of optical fibre, composed of glass and plastic, spanning across land and sea, has birthed an entirely novel ecosystem of virtual domains, agents, social and political structures, and unparalleled norms throughout history. In a mere span of 30 years, since the commercialization of Internet access commenced, society has undergone transformative changes. Consequently, criminality, violence, and conflicts between individuals, groups, and even nations have adapted to new manifestations. The field of cybersecurity governance research endeavours to comprehend, rationalize, and propose solutions to the intricate task of preserving cyberspace as a secure place. However, such an undertaking is not without its challenges. A comprehensive grasp of cybersecurity governance is only achievable through meticulous analysis of its constituent components and the intricate relationships that bind them into a cohesive whole.

In the studies of cybersecurity governance, two primary approaches have emerged: top-down and bottom-up. The first approach, top-down, seeks to comprehend cybersecurity governance by zooming out the analysis. It delves into the macro level, examining the behaviour of states, international and national norms, policies, etc., and the meso level, including organizational behaviour and business practices. From the macro perspective, for instance, scholars aim to understand how states define their sovereignty in cyberspace (e.g. Jensen, 2015), retaliate or not against other states for destructive or disruptive cyber operations (e.g. Kaminska, 2021), or create policies to protect their data and systems (e.g. De Busser, 2009; Porcedda,

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2018). From the meso level, studies aim to determine the most effective cybersecurity practices (e.g. Buil-Gil et al., 2021a), assess an organization's cybersecurity maturity (e.g. Maleh et al., 2021), or establish measures to prevent and manage threats within companies (e.g. Moneva & Leukfeldt, 2023; Trim & Upton, 2013). The second approach, bottom-up, explores cybersecurity governance from the end users' perspective, also known as the micro level. This level aims to understand secure behaviours (e.g. Moustafa et al., 2021), explain why some individuals adopt these behaviours more easily than others (e.g. De Kok et al., 2020), and propose solutions to make secure behaviour the easiest or default option (van Steen & De Busser, 2021).

In this chapter, we have brought together our research expertise in exploring both perspectives. On the one hand, we have examined the top-down perspective, seeking to understand the role of public institutions, private organizations, and professional communities, as well as the dynamics among them, in cybersecurity governance, with a particular focus on Spain (Del-Real, 2022; Del-Real & Díaz-Fernández, 2022; Del-Real & Rodríguez Mesa, 2023). On the other hand, we have adopted the bottom-up approach to investigate strategies for influencing user behaviour and enhancing awareness and training of employees in cybersecurity (van Steen & Deeleman, 2021). To accomplish our research goals, the fieldwork involved the participation of cybersecurity experts from intelligence services, law enforcement agencies, the military, cybersecurity firms, major technology corporations, national and regional governments, ethical hacking communities, as well as employees and end-users.

The following sub-section will present the characteristics of our three projects. Subsequently, in Sect. 2, we describe the phases of our fieldwork. Section 3 explains the methods employed, including interviews, Delphi, focus groups, and surveys. The ethical and emotional challenges associated with conducting research involving cybersecurity experts and end-users will be explored in Sect. 4. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarizing the lessons learned throughout the authors' research journey.

1.1 Project 1: Exploring the Spanish Cybersecurity Landscape

The first fieldwork experience is Del-Real's PhD project on actors and collaboration networks in cybersecurity in Spain (2017–2021). This research had three objectives: (i) to understand how organizations and hackers mobilize their capital¹ and interact

¹For my study on cybersecurity governance in Spain, I employed the conceptual framework of resource exchange through various forms of capital, adapted to security studies by Dupont (2004), and based on Bourdieu's notion of capital as exchange units (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, when referring to "capital", I encompass five types: economic, political, cultural, symbolic, and social. For further details on the conceptual framework, please refer to Dupont (2004) and Del-Real and Díaz-Fernández (2022).

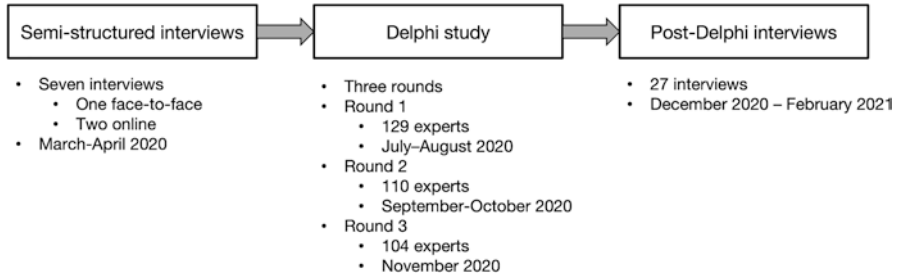


Fig. 26.1 Project 1 fieldwork design

with other entities to foster cybersecurity, (ii) to map the collaboration networks among these organizations and the hackers communities, and (iii) to determine the most likely future cybersecurity model for Spain in 2035. The fieldwork for this project involved face-to-face and online interviews, as well as a study using the Delphi method² (see Fig. 26.1). The interviews, both pre and post-Delphi, were semi-structured (Flick, 2007). The Delphi study was conducted in three rounds: an introductory round, a second round consisting of closed-ended questions, and a final round for feedback and consensus-building among the experts (for more details, see Sect. 3.2).

The study engaged a total of 134 cybersecurity experts in Spain, combining both interviews and the Delphi survey. The literature in the field of social science often employs the terms “experts” and “elites” interchangeably. However, it is important to note that these concepts refer to distinct types of assets. While an individual can possess expertise and simultaneously be a member of the elite, the two concepts convey different meanings. Expertise, as commonly defined in the majority of literature drawing from the sociology of knowledge, pertains to individuals with professional knowledge and specialized skills (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Petintseva et al., 2020). On the other hand, elites are characterized by their social position, which is based on factors such as power, authority, and high social status (van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). Although this conceptual distinction is theoretically significant, in practice, the link between knowledge and power often becomes blurred (Petintseva et al., 2020). Because in the domain of cybersecurity individuals with the highest levels of knowledge and expertise may not always hold positions of power (Tanczer, 2020), I define cybersecurity experts as those individuals who demonstrate exceptional knowledge and possess a comprehensive understanding of cybersecurity matters – i.e. these individuals were my research’s participants.

²The Delphi method was developed in the 1950s by Olaf Helmer and Theodore J. Gordon (Gordon & Helmer, 1964; Helmer, 1967) at the RAND Corporation as a technique for studying expert consensus on defence futures (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Rowe et al., 1991). In the Delphi method, consensus is achieved through a structured and iterative process in which experts anonymously express their opinions over multiple rounds. The data analysis aims to determine the degree of consensus among participants on each of the questions.

As a highly fragmented field (Cavelty & Wenger, 2022), studying cybersecurity governance required integrating a wide range of perspectives and experiences from experts with diverse backgrounds (following the advice by Rowe & Wright, 1999). Therefore, I incorporated participants from the five clusters of organizations that I had identified during the literature review and analysis of policy documents as being part of the cybersecurity system in Spain: (i) public sector (i.e. the National Cryptologic Centre (CCN)—³ the National Cybersecurity Institute (INCIBE)⁴ government offices such as the Department of Homeland Security, regional cybersecurity agencies,⁵ courts of justice, and prosecution services); (ii) law enforcement and armed forces (i.e. *Guardia Civil* and *Policía Nacional*,⁶ and the military's Joint Cyberspace Command); (iii) private technology sector companies (i.e. telecommunications, technology firms, internet service providers, etc.), (iv) other private companies (i.e. banking, security, transportation, etc.), and (v) universities and research centres. Having access to these agencies, I was able to reach out to and gather data from a diverse range of individuals from judges, police officers, military personnel, company CISOs,⁷ intelligence service members, government officials, full professors, and ethical hackers. The information from the participants was analysed from the epistemological approach of positivism (Miller & Glassner, 1997), considering the experts as a source of data that would be complemented with documentary analysis.

³The National Cryptologic Centre (*Centro Criptológico Nacional*, CCN) is an entity affiliated with the National Intelligence Centre (*Centro Nacional de Inteligencia*), the intelligence service in Spain. Its primary mandate is to contribute to the cybersecurity of networks and systems within the public sector, as well as companies and organizations of strategic interest.

⁴The National Cybersecurity Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Ciberseguridad*, INCIBE) is a Spanish public corporation whose primary role is to provide public services to citizens, businesses, and private companies of critical sectors.

⁵In addition to the national cybersecurity agencies in Spain, autonomous communities are also establishing their own regional cybersecurity agencies. For instance, examples include the Catalonia Cybersecurity Agency (*Agència de Ciberseguretat de Catalunya*) and the Andalusia Cybersecurity Centre (*Centro de Ciberseguridad de Andalucía*).

⁶In Spain, there are two law enforcement agencies with jurisdiction across the entire national territory: the *Guardia Civil* and the *Policía Nacional*. These two nationwide bodies serve as the primary law enforcement entities responsible for investigating cybercrime in Spain. The *Guardia Civil* operates two specialized groups dedicated to combating cybercrime: the Cybercrime Unit (*Grupo de Delitos Telemáticos*, GDT) and the Cyberterrorism Group (*Grupo de Ciberterrorismo*). Similarly, the *Policía Nacional* has its own Technological Investigation Unit (*Unidad de Investigación Tecnológica*) focused on investigating cyber-related offenses.

⁷Chief Information Security Officer.

1.2 Project 2: Cybersecurity Culture in Organizations

This postdoc project (van Steen) consisted of three focus groups within a single organization in the United Kingdom to investigate the views of end-users towards cybersecurity culture (2017–2018). The project was funded by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) of the United Kingdom who wanted to support research on improving organizational cybersecurity. The focus groups were proposed as we were interested in the views of end-users of all levels within the organization to get a complete overview of the organization's cybersecurity culture compared to only interviewing security specialists. The organization that took part in the case study was contacted by the NCSC and agreed to act as a testbed on the basis that they wanted to support the developments in the field of cybersecurity and they saw the project as a way to better understand their own practices and areas for improvement. As the anonymity of the organization in public reporting was a prerequisite for participation, no further information regarding the type, name of the organization or sector they worked in can be shared. The decision to only include three focus groups was made in agreement with the case study organization, as they were interested in us running focus groups in three different sites across the UK where they had organized security events in the past. An additional reason was that the organization had to balance the importance of the project with the time it would cost for their employees to attend. Participants were recruited by a gatekeeper within the organization with the goal of including people from various layers and job titles in the organization in every focus group. The focus groups were carried out by two researchers; one researcher with expertise in running focus groups and one with expertise on the topic of cybersecurity culture. Audio recordings were made, transcribed, and analysed for a report for the NCSC and the partnering organization.

1.3 Project 3: Gamification of Cybersecurity Training

This project by van Steen aimed to design a playable game to train end-users from the general public to behave more cybersecure. The format of the project was an MSc thesis supervised by van Steen. The project entailed the design of the cybersecurity game, as well as testing whether the game had improved the factors encompassed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991): attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, intentions, and self-reported behaviour. We designed a single player game using the online survey software Qualtrics as the environment for the game, as well as for the outcome measurements. The reason for choosing an online setting was that the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world during the runtime of the project. Initially, we intended to create an offline multiplayer game, but as it was impossible for participants to meet face-to-face, we had to redesign the game for an online setting. As creating an online environment for a multiplayer game was not feasible given the short timeframe of the project – only

5 months from start to finish – we opted for a single player experience instead. Members from the general public were invited to play a game in which they were presented with various “rounds” in which they could spend a virtual pot of money to buy assets for their department. Some assets were good for business, others for cybersecurity. In between rounds, our 258 participants were presented with cybersecurity challenges. In those challenges, they could benefit from assets they had bought and had to make decisions to respond to the cybersecurity challenges they were confronted with. Qualtrics was a useful tool for this study, as it is versatile in the type of questions and information that can be shared on screen and the routing option of the software. Using the routing option, participants’ decisions in the game were used as input for later rounds. For participants it looks like the software is responding directly to their unique choices, but they are in fact routed to a limited set of options throughout the game. After the game ended, outcome measures were recorded in the Qualtrics survey software, exported, analysed, and written up as MSc thesis and later as journal article (van Steen & Deeleman, 2021).

2 Phases of the Fieldwork

This section outlines the challenges and solutions we encountered during our fieldwork with cybersecurity experts and end-users of cybersecurity technologies.

2.1 Understanding Cybersecurity Concepts

Research in cybersecurity from the social sciences perspective is complex. As a complex socio-technical system (van den Berg et al., 2014), studying the dynamics surrounding cyberspace requires a minimum understanding of the technical aspects and acquisition of the language. Otherwise, there is a risk of misinterpreting the information we gather or missing relevant details (e.g. overlooking a technical concept). This is exactly what happened to me (Del-Real) at the beginning of my research. I decided to gather expert feedback on the questionnaire for each of the three Delphi rounds to ensure its accuracy. The first setback came with the comments from a computer science academic. Despite having dedicated endless hours to prepare the questionnaire, I received very negative feedback on the initial version, including the statement: “My advice is that you should first inform yourself better or formulate the questions more effectively, otherwise you won’t get any meaningful results. I say this from experience”, and he recommended that I acquire more technical knowledge “before attempting to ask questions”. Specifically, he pointed out in his comments that it was evident in the questionnaire that I did not understand the technical tasks carried out by each institution. And he was right. At that time, I would not have been able to explain the distinguishing activities between a Security Operation Center (SOC) and a Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT).

Understanding technical concepts is not only important for asking appropriate questions but also for obtaining and interpreting information. For instance, during the interviews following the Delphi study, I discovered a point of contention between the CCN and the police forces. The CCN have real-time monitoring probes installed in the networks of public administrations to identify threats and incidents. However, the police officers I interviewed complained that their organizations did not have easy access to this information, even though one of their mandates is to protect citizens' rights, freedoms, and security, including in cyberspace, in their opinion (Del-Real & Díaz-Fernández, 2022). The lack of infrastructure that would enable them to conduct this "virtual patrolling" compromised their ability to take action. In this instance, the fact that I was familiar with the concept the interviewees referred to as "SAT INET"⁸ when discussing these probes offered me two advantages. First, I could interpret this finding. I had followed the advice given to me by that computer science academic, and thanks to a better understanding of the technical concepts, I could identify and delve into a governance problem that would have otherwise gone completely unnoticed. And second, I was able to build trust with the participants by demonstrating my knowledge and understanding their language (Petintseva et al., 2020).

Aside from the potential to mistakenly explain concepts wrongly, in my experience (van Steen), another issue with a limited understanding of the cybersecurity field is that participants in focus groups might use a range of abbreviations to describe their procedures or an organizational structure. It was our task during the focus groups in Project 2 to then ask for clarification and ensure that we get it right. However, when a focus group participant uses large amounts of jargon, constantly asking for clarification or summarizing to see whether you as researcher have understood the point they are trying to make can disrupt the flow of the focus group and the intra group discussion, thereby denying us access to important information. In addition to the earlier mentioned reading up on technical aspects of cybersecurity, a second tool can be to first have a conversation with one or two experts in the organization to understand the various procedures and key events that have taken place before collecting data. For instance, when we conducted the focus groups, we first sat down with two security experts from the organization to hear about their awareness campaigns and other security culture initiatives so that we would more easily understand what the focus group participants could be referring to.

⁸In reference to the CCN's Internet Early Warning System. More information: <https://www.ccn-cert.cni.es/en/incident-management/early-warning-system-sat/sat-inet.html>

2.2 *Finding the Target Group: Cybersecurity Experts and End-Users*

Accessing cybersecurity experts is relatively straightforward. One simply needs to attend one of the dozens of cybersecurity conferences organized each year. However, gaining access to the most suitable cybersecurity experts for the study's objectives, especially during a pandemic, is more complex. Based on the five clusters of organizations for Project 1, I (Del-Real) initially sent emails to these organizations to request an interview with one of their members. This strategy soon proved completely futile. Most of my emails went unanswered, and the few organizations that did respond cited a lack of time as the reason for their refusal.

This result – which was, on the other hand, expected – led me to reorganize my field access strategy. Two decisions proved successful in gaining access to participants: attending specialized conferences and drawing on the networks of one of my thesis supervisors. First, attending conferences and technology fairs allowed me to expand my network of contacts. In particular, my participation in various editions of the *Smart City World Expo Congress* in Barcelona, the *Hackplayers' Hacking Conference* (H-CON), and the *International Security Exhibition* in Madrid proved highly fruitful. During this field access phase at conferences, I observed that it was much more effective to approach executives in the conference rooms where they delivered presentations or attended as listeners, rather than at the stands of technology fairs, where it was less likely to find these high-level experts of interest. To maximize my effectiveness in contacting potential participants at conferences, it was crucial to prepare in advance a list of target participants, enabling me to locate them once at the conference, and to have a concise and compelling pitch about my study ready.

The second decision was to leverage the networks and reputation of one of my thesis supervisors, Dr. Antonio Díaz Fernández. In the field of security studies in Spain, Dr. Díaz Fernández is known as one of the pioneering scholars in the study of the *Centro Nacional de Inteligencia* (CNI, the Spanish National Intelligence Centre) (Díaz-Fernández, 2005). His research on the history and evolution of the CNI led him to interview – and to still be in touch with – numerous intelligence agents, military personnel, and political elites. Additionally, he is one of the Spanish experts on ethical issues in sensitive research topics in criminology and security studies (Díaz-Fernández, 2019). Associating my name with his supervision, in my opinion, offered two main advantages in accessing the field. First, I gained access to his contacts in the intelligence service, police, and armed forces, which undoubtedly saved me months of work in reaching out to experts from these organizations. Second, I benefited – perhaps due to the halo effect (Beckwith & Lehmann, 1975) – from his reputation as a respected researcher who is trustworthy and committed to research ethics. As one of the interviewees expressed: “If you're doing your thesis with Antonio, I trust you”.

To contact participants, I first compiled a list of potential names, including those contacts identified through conferences and my supervisors (as well as other colleagues). I sent them an email following the template outlined in Fig. 26.2. In

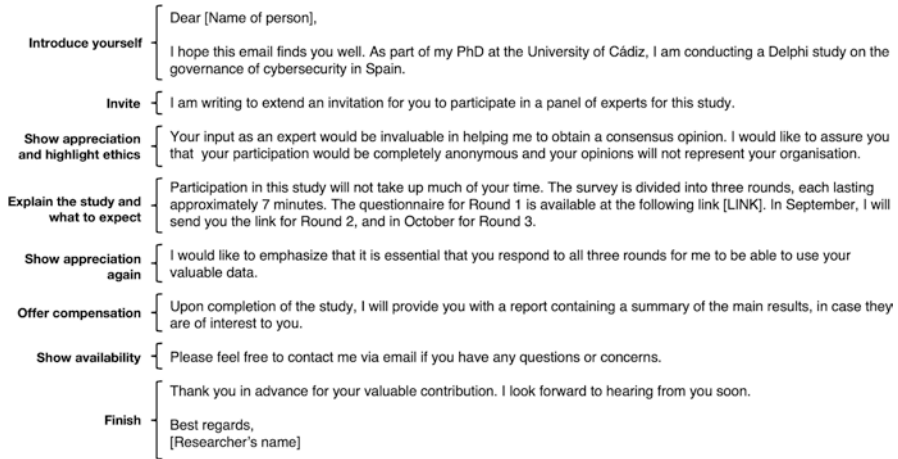


Fig. 26.2 Example of an invitation email

conversations with participants following the completion of my Delphi study, some highlighted the elements of my email that had made them take me seriously and, as they put it, “reassured” them: (i) including what I expected from them (i.e. participation) from the beginning of the email; (ii) promptly emphasizing in the email that their participation would be anonymous and their opinions would not be associated with their organization (see Sect. 4 below); and (iii) clearly explaining the study’s dynamics (i.e. dates, deadlines, effort required, etc.), which allowed them to make an informed decision based on the study’s timeline and expectations. Of the invited contacts, some responded positively, while others referred me to other contacts who, in their opinion, could be of greater utility. In total, I invited 275 Spanish experts, including both initial contacts and those obtained through the snowball sampling method.

Another method to find participants for qualitative studies is through gatekeepers. This is particularly crucial when trying to access hard-to-reach groups. For instance, in Project 1, I (Del-Real) encountered two challenging groups to reach: women who are cybersecurity experts and ethical hackers. To engage the first group, given the existing gender bias in cybersecurity, I sought assistance from the *Women in Cybersecurity in Spain* association in Spain. They acted as gatekeepers by sharing the invitation to my study with their extensive network of over 300 members. As for the second group, having the support of a highly connected cybersecurity journalist with deep knowledge of ethical hacking proved to be immensely valuable.

In Project 2 (van Steen), we worked with an organization that had an interest in the research being carried out. In that study, it was helpful to use the gatekeeper to get access to relevant people as our focus groups required a range of job titles to be present at the same time and location. A potential downside to using a gatekeeper is that it might also prevent access to relevant participants (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016). For example, they can select people who are supportive of the views of the

gatekeeper, leading to potentially biased findings. However, in our focus group project, the gatekeeper was able to recruit a variety of participants due to him having been travelling around the various sites to deliver security training in the past. This trusted individual from within the own organization allowed us to recruit more people who were willing to spend time talking to us and sharing their experiences in the focus groups.

2.3 *Collecting Data*

In our fieldwork experiences, we have encountered two main issues when asking questions to participants: disparities in cybersecurity knowledge and reluctance to answer sensitive questions. First, disparities in cybersecurity knowledge pertain to both vocabulary and content. For instance, in Project 1 (Del-Real), striking a balance to make the Delphi questionnaire accessible to both technically oriented participants (e.g. ethical hackers) and those with less technical expertise (e.g. judges) posed a challenge. To address this issue, I sought experts from diverse backgrounds to review the questionnaire for all three rounds before its launch. While this decision undoubtedly increased accessibility to a wider range of profiles, achieving full accessibility in such a complex topic is difficult to achieve. For example, four experts who had completed the Round 1 questionnaire opted not to proceed to Round 2. Their choice was influenced by the high level of specialization required to adequately respond to the questions. Additionally, three other experts requested to answer the questionnaires while speaking with me over the phone, as they had some doubts about the questions.

In Project 2, the focus was on the organizational aspects instead of the technical aspects of cybersecurity. As we invited end-users from all layers in the organization, some had a more thorough understanding of what the organization was currently doing to build a cybersecurity culture than others. Therefore, the questions we formulated had to be broad enough to ensure that all participants could take part in the conversation that followed. Once the conversation started, it was then our responsibility to make sure that all participants were understanding the comments made by others. Sometimes we did that by briefly clarifying a statement that we thought might be too complex. Other times, we asked the participant who brought up a certain point to elaborate. A complicating factor here was that not all end-users had been with the company long. Some of the examples then shared by the end-users did not resonate with the end-users who had joined the company only recently which at one or two occasions caused confusion for some end-users.

Second, we encountered instances where participants attempted to evade answering contentious or sensitive questions. For instance, in Project 1, participants provided information with varying levels of depth. Experts from the private sector offered insightful and detailed perspectives on the challenges and issues related to collaboration between public organizations and the private sector (see Del-Real & Díaz-Fernández, 2022). However, a few experts from the public sector simply

repeated during the interviews that “everything was going smoothly” without offering any further details. Specifically, in two cases, I had to cut short the interviews with representatives from public organizations shortly after they began, as it became evident that my attempts to inquire only resulted in scripted, politically correct responses lacking substantial content. Consequently, it became crucial to gather information about the same organizations from multiple sources and assign greater validity to results that were consistently reported by multiple experts in separate sessions.

2.4 *Engaging Participants*

Obtaining and maintaining participant engagement is another challenge in cybersecurity research with experts and end-users. As Bulmer (1982, p. 3) stated, “no-one gives anything away for nothing, especially the truth”. Additionally, participation is always voluntary. Therefore, it is important to try to understand why participants agree to take part in our research. In Project 1 (Del-Real), I identify two reasons that may explain why I obtained such a high participant sample in the Delphi process – i.e. 129 experts in the first round, exceeding 83% of Delphi studies (Gargon et al., 2019). First, because the research topic – cybersecurity governance – is still evolving. Previous studies have described how participants sometimes choose to participate in order to provide insights into the changes occurring within their group (Clark, 2010). In this regard, I believe that participants saw in my research an opportunity to inform the scientific community about the advancements being made by public organizations and companies in the field of cybersecurity. Second, because my research focused on understanding the roles of and collaborative relationships between public and private organizations. Therefore, the contacted experts may have interpreted their participation as an opportunity for their organization to be represented in the study (Clark, 2010).

During Project 1, I employed three techniques to ensure the engagement of the participants. First, I aimed to streamline the interaction with participants through email and phone communication. I made sure to respond to messages and emails from invited experts within 10 minutes, conveying a sense of complete availability to address any questions or concerns they had. Second, I offered to provide a copy of the research findings. This may have increased their curiosity about the results (Clark, 2010), keeping them motivated to participate in all three rounds. Lastly, I sent two to three reminders in each round. Starting from Round 2, the initial invitation email was generic, but I personalized the subsequent reminders to enhance their perception of commitment and encourage consistency in their behaviour (Becker, 1960). Consistent with studies on the effect of reminders in increasing response rates (e.g. Blumenberg et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2012), Fig. 26.3 illustrates how responses increased after each reminder.

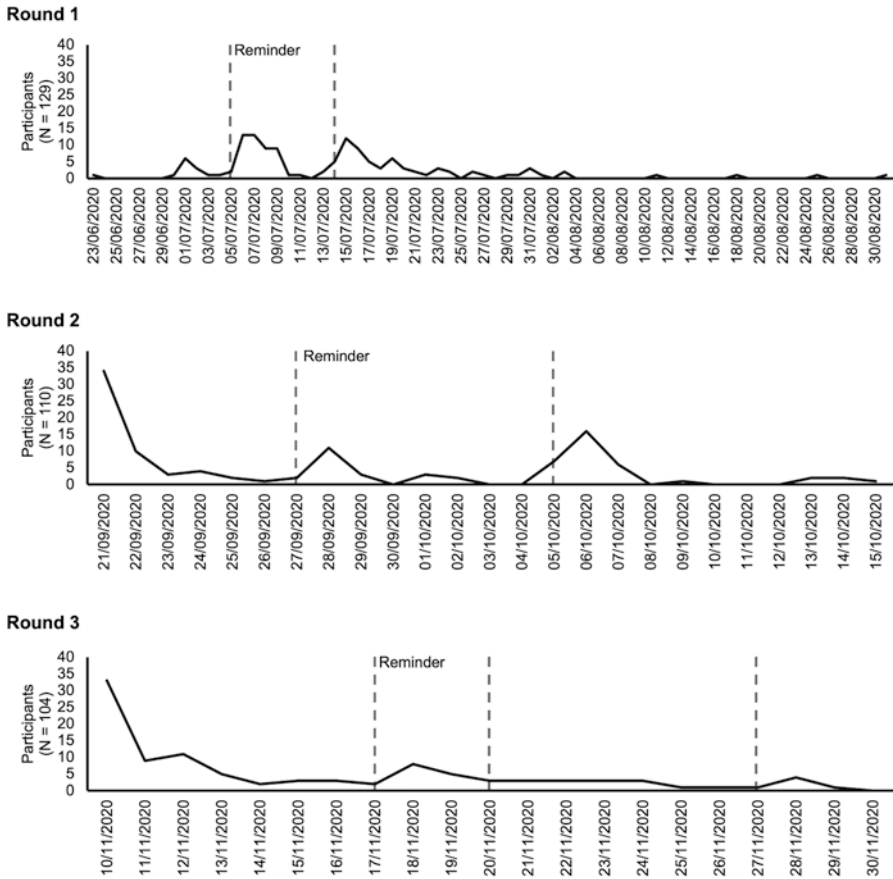


Fig. 26.3 Relationship between responses received and reminders in Project 1

3 Data Collection Techniques

This section outlines the research techniques employed in our investigation of cybersecurity governance. Specifically, we discuss four techniques: interviews, the Delphi method, focus groups, and surveys.

3.1 Interviews

For Project 1 (Del-Real), I deemed it most appropriate to conduct semi-structured interviews given the complexity and sensitivity of the study’s objectives. The interviews were aligned with Brinkmann’s doxastic interview (2007), which aims at

understanding the functioning of practices or events. The choice to conduct semi-structured interviews was particularly driven by the characteristics of the participants, who were experts, predominantly senior executives, and individuals with over 15 years of experience in the cybersecurity sector. This specificity necessitated semi-structured interviews, allowing for the emergence of new themes and avoiding participants' sense of being scrutinized (Díaz-Fernández, 2019).

At that time, I was pursuing my PhD at the Faculty of Law of the University of Cádiz (Spain), while residing in Sevilla. However, the majority of my potential participants were based in Madrid and Barcelona, the economic and political centres of Spain. Therefore, I planned two research visits to academic institutions in Madrid and Barcelona. In the case of Madrid, the *General Gutiérrez Mellado University Institute* affiliated with the Open University (UNED) kindly agreed to host me as a visiting researcher during the months of April and May 2020, under the supervision of Prof. Carlos Echeverría. The choice of this institution was due to its extensive faculty of professors and researchers in security studies. Additionally, the research visit in Madrid would allow for extensive fieldwork based on the contacts I had established in previous months (see Sect. 2.2). In Barcelona, the Research and Analysis Group of Public Administration at the University of Barcelona, led by Prof. Rafael Martínez, director of the Master's Program in Strategic Security and Policing Management, accepted the research visit for the month of June 2020. The selection of this research group was based on their extensive work in security management (e.g. Martínez & Durán, 2017) and the opportunity to access telecommunication companies and major technology corporations headquartered in Catalonia. However, I was unable to carry out any of the research visits due to unforeseen circumstances.

On March 14, 2020, the Spanish government declared a State of Alarm in response to the health crisis caused by Covid-19. The State of Alarm lasted for a total of 98 days, during which social distancing measures were implemented to contain the spread of the virus. These measures included restrictions on leaving home, holding gatherings, and traveling outside the province of residence. As a result of these social distancing measures, the planned research visits to Madrid and Barcelona had to be cancelled. Prior to the lockdown, I was only able to conduct 1 of the 15 scheduled interviews for the months of March and April, some of which had already been scheduled with specific dates and times. When mobility restrictions were announced, I contacted the participants to propose conducting the interviews via video call. Six of them agreed to proceed with the interviews through video calls, two did not respond, and the rest requested to be contacted once the crisis had ended.

Given such a low rate of positive response, I decided to reach out to other potential participants whose profile aligned with the objectives of my study through LinkedIn and email, as well as through recommendations from other participants using the snowball sampling technique. However, this approach proved to be unsuccessful. During the lockdown, there was an increase in cybercrime incidents (e.g. Buil-Gil et al., 2021b), which significantly heightened the workload of cybersecurity experts. As a result, they progressively started to cancel the scheduled

interviews. Moreover, newly contacted cybersecurity experts declined the interview requests, largely due to their overwhelming workload stemming from crisis management and their high-level managerial roles within their organizations.

The inability to conduct fieldwork in Madrid and Barcelona led to significant changes in the study's methodology. Initial discussions with the experts revealed that various professional and personal factors, along with the impersonal nature of video calls, would hinder and complicate the original interview process. Moreover, the experts declined to participate in online interviews due to their confidentiality obligations with their respective companies, which required them to maintain privacy. These obligations sometimes involved surveillance to ensure adherence to these commitments. After considering different options for several weeks, it was decided to conduct a comprehensive Delphi study consisting of three rounds (see Sect. 3.2).

In the questionnaire of the third round of the Delphi study, I asked the participants if they would be available for an interview. A total of 68 agreed to be interviewed. I then extended invitations to the 30 expert participants in the Delphi study who had shared the most compelling and, in some cases, contrasting opinions. Out of these 30 experts, 27 accepted the invitation. All interviews were conducted via video call or telephone, according to the preference of the interviewees. No interviews were audio-recorded, as I considered that this privacy would allow participants to feel more comfortable and express their opinions with greater freedom (Díaz-Fernández, 2019), which was crucial for profiling and understanding elusive causes and elements of the study. I transcribed the interview in real-time on a blank Word document while conversing with the interviewee. Although this method initially seemed like a good option to gather as much material as possible, it became impossible to capture all the nuances mentioned by the interviewees. To mitigate the loss of valuable information, I shared my research notes with those participants who expressed willingness to review them and provide additional insights after the interview. Unfortunately, I am aware that valuable material was lost due to my decision not to record the interviews. Therefore, for subsequent studies, I decided to prioritize offering the possibility of a non-recorded interview as an exception rather than the norm. This way, it is much more likely to ensure transparency, rigor, and accuracy in the collected data.

The adaptation I had to make to the data collection technique taught me three main lessons. First, virtual tools can be an alternative when conducting in-person research is not possible, but they are not a substitute for in-person interviews. Specifically, I noticed a significant difference between the initial in-person interviews compared to the online interviews. Online interviews feel more impersonal, making it more challenging to establish rapport with the interviewee. Additionally, in my experience, fewer spontaneous topics emerged, and the interviewees became fatigued more quickly. Second, every research design should have a rigorous and detailed contingency plan as robust as the primary plan. This practice, well-established in EU-funded projects, saves a lot of time and resources in case the planned collection method fails. Lastly, I learned that different research designs can support each other beyond scientific aspects (e.g. data triangulation). For instance, I was

surprised when, after implementing the Delphi study, a total of 68 experts (out of the 134 participants) agreed to be interviewed. Despite being already in the middle of a pandemic and understanding their likely busy schedules, the Delphi study served as a gateway to gaining their trust, increasing their willingness to be interviewed. Therefore, it is advisable to design research and contingency plans from a scientific and as well strategic perspective.

3.2 *Delphi Method*

For Project 1 (Del-Real), I designed a three-round Delphi study with cybersecurity experts. This methodology replaced the in-depth interviews that had to be cancelled due to the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time when I designed my study, I did not find precedents for the use of the Delphi method in the study of cybersecurity. Previous studies have predominantly employed this method to investigate the priorities in violence prevention (e.g. Mikton et al., 2017) and formulate indicators for its measurement (e.g. de Melo et al., 2021). However, I decided to proceed with this method because it has been widely employed in prospective studies on the impact of technology in various fields (e.g. Keller & von der Gracht, 2014).

Although different from in-depth interviews, the Delphi method allows for similar conclusions and offers some additional advantages compared to interviews, as stated in various research studies (e.g. Gargon et al., 2019). First, the utilization of the Delphi method enabled me to significantly reduce the time commitment required from participants. Instead of conducting lengthy interviews lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to over an hour, I employed an online questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Second, Delphi is a method that can – and should – be conducted remotely. Unlike interviews, which were better suited for physical interaction to accurately analyse participants' non-verbal language, the choice of the Delphi method was consistent with the circumstances during which a significant portion of my fieldwork had to be conducted – the Covid-19 pandemic – when other forms of social interaction beyond the virtual realm were not possible. Lastly, the data collection dynamics of the Delphi method reduce biases that may arise from researcher-participant interaction, which can affect the quality of research outcomes. All this represented an advantage over interviews.

During Project 1 fieldwork, I made several choices regarding the design, execution, and exiting fieldwork strategy that may be of help to future researchers. In the *design phase*, I made two decisions that, in my opinion, enhanced the results' quality. First, although the majority of Delphi studies consist of two rounds (see e.g. Camara et al., 2019), I opted for a three-round Delphi: an introductory round, a second round of closed-ended questions, and a final round for feedback and consensus-building among the experts. This choice allowed me to design open-ended questions in the first round, capturing the complexity of the problem more effectively.

While two-round Delphi studies are less time-consuming for both researchers and participants, the introductory round provided valuable and nuanced information that enriched the subsequent rounds. Second, I ensured that the questionnaires for all three rounds were reviewed by at least five experts from diverse backgrounds who could offer comments and suggestions before their implementation.

During the *execution phase* it was crucial to understand and empathize with the characteristics of the participants. 70.3% of them had a minimum of 6 years of experience in the field of cybersecurity, 72.9% held managerial positions, and they came from different types of organizations with distinct organizational cultures. This presented two challenges for the execution of the Delphi. First, I had to transparently communicate with my participants and ensure that I would not waste their time. While I recognize that this requirement should characterize all research, it is particularly important when working with experts who may perceive their involvement as an act of generosity towards the researcher (van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). Second, I had to adapt my language to suit the diverse profiles of the experts. I quickly realized that with private sector professionals and with policymakers, I could establish a more informal and friendly language (some even ended their emails with affectionate phrases like “sending hugs”). However, with personnel from the military, police, and intelligence services – very hierarchical organizations – I always maintained a formal language and showed respect for their rank. For instance, I maintained an Excel spreadsheet where I recorded their respective ranks, such as “Colonel” or “Inspector,” to ensure I addressed them appropriately using the correct protocol.

Finally, during the *exiting phase*, it is crucial to acknowledge the efforts made by the participants. Exiting the field is just as important as entering it, as the manner in which this phase is conducted can either open the door to future research opportunities or close it indefinitely – not only for us, but also for future researchers (Díaz-Fernández, 2019). This holds even greater significance in the context of my own investigation. In a world engulfed by chaos, amidst a global pandemic that disrupted every facet of life, these individuals kindly offered their valuable time to help me make sense of the complex network of institutions and organizations governing cybersecurity in Spain. Consequently, it was paramount to express my appreciation by personally sending each participant a tailored *thank-you* email. Additionally, I provided interested participants with copies of my thesis and relevant publications. To this day, I maintain contact with some individuals who have shown interest in my professional trajectory and future research endeavours.

3.3 Focus Groups

For Project 2 on cybersecurity culture (van Steen), we conducted three focus groups. Focus groups are a method to elicit new insights through the interaction of the participants (Morgan, 1996). The participants in the focus groups were employees from a range of layers within a single organization, which we analysed using thematic

analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The number of participants per focus group ranged from 6 to 16 end-users and covered a wide range of job roles, including Human Resources staff, Information Technology personnel, Health and Safety officers, personal assistants, and project engineers. The focus groups lasted about 1.5–2 hours and two researchers were present. One researcher acted as facilitator, leading the discussion, posing questions and asking for clarification, while the other observed and took notes, and occasionally interjected a follow-up question to a response of one of the participants. This division helped in streamlining the focus groups, as well as double checking that all relevant areas of the discussion were covered and any required clarification in terms of abbreviations or organizational processes was achieved. This was necessary, as it would have been impossible to go back to a single participant with follow-up questions once the audio recordings of the focus groups had been transcribed. Additionally, adding a second researcher ensured that in case of technical failure of the audio recordings, notes and basic insights were still available. As stated before, the goal of these focus groups was to further investigate the findings of an earlier series of interviews with security specialists in the same organization. The set of questions used in the focus groups was designed by the two researchers who facilitated the discussion during the focus groups and was then sense checked by a third researcher from the same department as well as the point of contact in the partnering organization. Organising the focus groups helped us in two ways.

First, the focus groups were ideal in examining whether there was any truth in the perceptions and views expressed by gatekeepers in a set of preliminary meetings where the goals and logistics of the focus groups were discussed. There, the gatekeepers outlined that security specialists within the organization viewed themselves as enablers of working in a secure fashion, while they felt that the rest of the organization sees them as blockers. This tension was confirmed in the focus groups where the participants acknowledged that they viewed the security specialists as blocking them from meeting their job goals instead of enabling them. The second way in which the focus groups helped us understand the current security culture at the organization was through testing their experiences with cybersecurity training materials. In the focus groups we could investigate whether the views of the security experts aligned with those of the end-users and dive deeper into why these views of “enablers” and “blockers” exist and what might be done to change that in the future.

3.4 Surveys

In contrast to interviews, focus groups, and Delphi studies, surveys are used for large scale data collection, where the in-depth experiences, views, and perceptions of people are of lesser importance, and the wider view together with the option to draw conclusions about relationships between variables is key. Where surveys are a useful tool is in determining the effectiveness of campaigns to improve end-user security. While surveys are a great way to conduct research in the field of

cybersecurity governance, its applicability depends greatly on the specific research question and target group. Some projects require such in-depth knowledge from participants that a survey study cannot possibly result in enough participants taking part, or the survey questions are inadequate to tease out the intricacies of the phenomenon under investigation.

When we designed our survey on the gamification of cybersecurity training (Project 3), we used the survey tool to deliver the cybersecurity training, as well as measure the effectiveness of the training. The advantage of combining both the delivery of the training and the outcome measurement in the same tool is that we can more easily export the data for analysis, that we do not need participants to move between platforms and that we could register additional data on the survey process, such as the time passed between starting the game and finishing the survey. Given the 5-month timeframe of the project, we did not have the opportunity to design and validate a complete new set of survey questions for the outcome measures. Instead, we based our outcome measures on earlier research on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (McMillan & Conner, 2003; Poulter et al., 2008). We chose the Theory of Planned Behaviour factors as outcome measures, as these factors are often used to investigate the effectiveness of cybersecurity training (e.g. Cook et al., 2017).

One potential issue with surveys is that participants cannot ask for clarification while filling out the surveys. When designing surveys, we are often prone to use jargon. It is key for us to ensure that the participants in a survey study understand the various concepts they are asked about. In some cases, this means that we need to word concepts differently so that participants understand. While the same issue can arise in a qualitative interview or focus group study, participants in those studies can ask for clarification if they do not understand the interviewer, or the interviewer can clarify when it seems that the answer to a particular question does not capture the concepts they were asking about. In survey research you only get one chance to explain the tasks and questions correctly and unless you pilot your study extensively, you will only find out at the analysis stage whether or not participants understood what was asked of them.

4 Ethical and Emotional Challenges

In this section, we explain three challenges that we have encountered in our research with cybersecurity experts and end-users: ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, managing participant demands, and striking the right balance in the participant relationship. Generally, research studies require approval from ethics committees. However, in Project 1 (Del-Real), I did not obtain any approval as the University of Cádiz only has a bioethics committee that has recently started evaluating social science projects. In Project 2 (van Steen), we obtained ethical approval from the ethics committee through a standardized form and standardized informed consent sheet. In the form, the ethics committee wants to see clear answers on questions regarding

both participant and researcher safety, as well the goal and methods of the study. The informed consent sheet included the standard sections on voluntary participation and the option to stop participating at any time without requiring to provide a reason.

Project 3 (van Steen) was interesting in terms of ethical approval, as the data were collected by a student I supervised as part of her MSc programme. The programme at the time required a light touch ethical approval process for MSc thesis projects. This process consisted of a brief questionnaire students had to complete. Based on their answers, specific themes were flagged by the online system and these themes were then discussed with the thesis supervisor and changes to the research design were implemented if needed. While this way of working was the standard for MSc projects within the department at the time, it raised some questions from one of the reviewers of the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* when we submitted the paper for publication. They were worried that we did not do a full ethical approval process through an Institutional Review Board (IRB). We were able to explain that the followed method was the standard practice within the department and after clarifying the procedure in the main body of the article, the reviewer accepted the ethical approval method used by the department for this study. For future projects involving student researchers, it is beneficial to proactively seek advice from the IRB to avoid delays in the publication process.

4.1 Ensuring Anonymity and Confidentiality

Ensuring anonymity is crucial for participants to share their information without the risk of negative consequences (Nespor, 2000). In Project 1 (Del-Real), I implemented four strategies to guarantee participant anonymity, protect the data collected, and prevent deductive disclosure (Boruch & Cecil, 1979). First, I replaced participants' names with a unique code composed of three elements: sex (e.g. F for female experts), sector of expertise (e.g. PS for Public Sector), and interview order (e.g. F-PS7 for the seventh female expert from the public sector). Second, I eliminated references to specific organizations, replacing them with an "X" (see Del-Real & Rodriguez Mesa, 2023). In some cases, the interviewees themselves requested not to include this information in writing. Third, I kept a record of participating experts in a password-protected folder on a computer that was also password-protected. Lastly, in my research, I only collected email addresses as personally identifiable information in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Parliament and Council of Europe, 2016), the norm that informs the Data Protection in EU countries. During the three rounds of the Delphi, I informed participants that the email address provided by them would be solely used for communication purposes and to match their responses across the three rounds. Once the three rounds were completed, I replaced each participant's email address with a generated code, and subsequently deleted the email list.

In Project 2, similar methods were used. However, we also added more safeguards to ensure that the organization as a whole was also kept anonymous. This included conversations with gatekeepers on specific lingo used in the organization, such as how they refer to their security culture team, specific slogans that were unique to teams within that organization, as well as leaving out some identifying details in descriptions of specific awareness campaigns they ran. The conversations with gatekeepers are of importance as there might be some wording of specific organizational structures that seem quite generic, but that together with other information about the organization (such as whether it is a national/international organization, the sector they are in, etc.) might make the organization instantly identifiable for people working in the same sector. We require independence as researchers in terms of our analysis and conclusions and the quotes we incorporate in our reports and publications. However, it is important to work together with organizations regarding naming specific instances, initiatives, or incidents, when these can also be described in broader terms if possible and without sacrificing scientific rigour and validity. We achieved this through sharing draft versions of our reports that included specific quotes by participants with the gatekeepers. The gatekeepers could then check whether some wording in the quotes needed a higher level of anonymization, for example, through the use of generic placeholders such as [*security slogan*] or [*company department*] or whether the level of anonymity was already appropriate.

4.2 *Managing Demands from Participants*

As mentioned earlier, participants may have certain expectations from the research (Bulmer, 1982). They may expect you to provide them with information about other participants, take a stance, or solve a particular problem. For instance, in Project 1 (Del-Real), I encountered instances where some participants inquired about who had already participated and what had been said about their organizations (see Harvey, 2011 for a similar case). While these inquiries were always conducted respectfully, I must admit that certain participants from the public sector were somewhat persistent in seeking information about what other participants had said about them. In such cases, it is important to maintain neutrality, adopt a professional role, and decline to provide information, especially if it has not yet been verified from other sources. Although this refusal may initially disrupt the interview dynamic, it can be redirected towards a positive outcome by emphasizing that any information the participant shares will also remain confidential and undisclosed to others if they inquire.

4.3 *Striking the Right Balance in the Relationship with Participants*

A final challenge in research with cybersecurity experts and end-users is finding a balance in the relationship with the participants. Particularly, in the case of cybersecurity experts, many of the recommendations for researching vulnerable populations such as minors, victims of violence, or incarcerated offenders do not apply (Liamputtong, 2007). In these cases, the researcher may be perceived as holding a position of power over the participants. However, in research with cybersecurity experts, the power dynamics are reversed. My participants (Del-Real) were highly specialized professionals, with 80.6% of them being male and an average of 11 and a half years of experience in cybersecurity. Meanwhile, I conducted the research as a 27-year-old female PhD student. Therefore, my challenge was to convey to them the value of my research and their participation in it, while also ensuring that I did not reproduce gender and age power structures in respect for my own work and my position as early career researcher (Lefkowich, 2019).

In particular, apart from repeatedly emphasizing the study objectives, I took three measures to prevent any uncomfortable situations with the participants. First, the few in-person interviews I conducted always took place in public spaces, such as a café. Second, I dressed in formal and neutral attire during the interviews. And third, in all communications with the participants, I made sure to include the names of my thesis supervisors, who were often copied on the emails. I must say that during the course of the research, the majority of participants were respectful and assertive, and to this day, I maintain a good professional relationship with some of them. However, I did have three uncomfortable encounters with three experts. The first two incidents were a result of paternalistic behaviours exhibited by two experts. In both cases, their critical remarks about my study were characterized by condescension and arrogance, causing me to doubt my credibility as a researcher.⁹ The third incident involved another participant who displayed a clear interest in maintaining contact after the interview had concluded. I started feeling uneasy when this individual persisted in asking me personal questions via WhatsApp for several days following the interview. Upon discussing the matter with my supervisors, I decided to respond in a direct and professional manner, consistently redirecting the conversation towards the objectives of my study. This approach ultimately put an end to the participant's attempts to reach out to me.

As the Netherlands is a small country, working in the Dutch cybersecurity field means that you are likely to run into former participants at some point during conferences and other meetings. As we promise anonymity when we invite people to take part in our research, we should not disclose that people took part in our research to others. When meeting former participants in a group setting, my approach (van Steen) is that I do not bring up that they participated in a research project that I conducted and do not say anything about it, unless they bring it up themselves. In

⁹I have chosen not to provide further information about these cases to avoid deductive disclosure.

some cases, it is difficult or even impossible to pretend you have never met before, but acknowledging that you know each other is different from disclosing you know them as participant in your research. Making that distinction is key in ensuring anonymity and striking the right balance in the relationship with participants.

5 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

This chapter finishes with a summary of the lessons learned during our research projects. First, regardless of whether it is qualitative or quantitative research, piloting the study is key. The pilot phase of the study may involve gathering feedback from experts on the measurement tools (questionnaire, interview script, etc.) and conducting pre-tests. For instance, the pilot study can assist us in striking an appropriate balance between the use of technical concepts and accessibility to a broad range of participants.

A second valuable lesson we learned, closely tied to the intricacies of studying cybersecurity within the realm of social sciences, is the importance of conducting extensive preliminary research to grasp technical concepts. For instance, we highly recommend preparing a comprehensive glossary of essential terms and acronyms for the project. This glossary can be continually expanded and refined with new terms and acronyms that emerge during the pilot study and fieldwork phase. Having a robust technical vocabulary not only enhances our data interpretation but also builds rapport with the participants. It enables us to establish a level of understanding and credibility as researchers.

Third, it is of utmost importance to have a well-developed contingency plan in case the primary data collection method encounters any issues. It is recommended to strategically design this contingency plan, ensuring its alignment with the primary data collection method. Such a decision enables the possibility of repurposing prior work in the event that the primary method needs to be abandoned.

Finally, the demonstration of availability and trustworthiness, along with the facilitation of direct communication and timely reminders, plays a pivotal role in fostering participant engagement with the research. However, it is of paramount importance for researchers, particularly early career researchers investigating individuals in positions of power, to navigate this delicate balance with utmost care and consideration. By doing so, we can create an environment of mutual respect and professionalism that not only enhances the quality of our research but also safeguards against potential discomfort or misuse of power dynamics.

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Chapter 27

Fieldwork Experiences Researching Cybercriminals



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1 Introduction

To better understand cybercrime and improve cybersecurity in highly digitalized societies, it is increasingly important to broaden knowledge about cybercriminals: actors capable of exploiting information technologies. Researching cybercriminals, however, can often be challenging as they tend to operate ‘in the dark’ and stay under the radar.

This chapter is about our field experiences researching cybercriminals. Our experiences include direct contact through interviews, administration of questionnaires, and participation in capture-the-flag exercises; and indirect contact through analysis of self-reported data and large-scale police investigations. Note that although in many cases we focus on specific cybercriminals, such as criminal hackers, the insights we gained from our research can also be applied to cybercriminals more generally. This is one of the things you first learn when you do fieldwork on cybercriminals: no two individuals are alike. The organized phisher who targets elderly people has little to do with the loner hacktivist who protests on social media; the experienced hacker who encrypts organizational data for ransom is quite different from the script kiddie who defaces a website to gain status, and so on. Moreover, categories of cybercriminals are often blurred as actors can play different roles at

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the same time. What are then hackers? How do they identify themselves? Are they cybercriminals? Cybercriminals often combine cybercrime with traditional deception techniques. Some do hacking, yes, but also phishing, and offline social engineering.

2 Cybercrime and Hacking, Cybercriminals, and Hackers

There is a belief that cybercrime is highly technical. The truth is that sometimes it is, but many times it is not. There are different degrees of technification. Cyber-dependent crimes would be those more technical crimes that did not exist before the Internet, and that use computers to attack other computers, like hacking, malware infection, or distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks; cyber-enabled crimes—in contrast—would be those not so technical crimes that already existed before the Internet did, and that usually target people, like fraud, stalking or sexual harassment (McGuire, 2020; McGuire & Dowling, 2013). Annual Internet crime reports from the FBI suggest that cyber-enabled crimes are far more prevalent than cyber-dependent crimes, especially phishing and its variants. In 2021, 323,972 victims of phishing, vishing, smishing, and pharming attest that social engineering—a rather untechnical strategy—was frequently used by cybercriminals to reap about \$44,213,707 in profits (Internet Crime Complaint Center, 2021).

Like cybercrime, hacking has degrees of technicality. Legal definitions of hacking refer to entering computer systems without permission (i.e., trespassing), but this can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, a hack can consist of a backdoor virus attack, a brute force attack, a SQL injection, a phishing attack, or copying a user's password from a post-it. It can therefore range from techniques that require advanced programming knowledge to techniques that do not require any IT knowledge at all. Extralegal definitions are much broader and focus on behavioral aspects around the application of IT knowledge (Holt, 2020; Yar & Steinmetz, 2019). For example, Steinmetz defines hacking as “a transgressive craft”.

Within the category ‘cybercriminals’, there are also notable differences. In cybercrime studies, the hacker is often considered a subcategory of cybercriminal, but the concepts of cybercriminal and hacker are in fact fluid; they can just as easily be (erroneously) interchanged as not at all (Yar & Steinmetz, 2019). Originally, the term hacker had a positive connotation—or at least not a negative one. Malicious actors were in fact known as *crackers*. Later on this distinction faded away, although many members of the hacking community still object when both groups are conflated (Jordan, 2017). To make matters worse, there are also different types of hackers. For example, malicious or *black-hat* hackers look for vulnerabilities in computer systems with criminal intent, while ethical or *white-hat* hackers look for vulnerabilities to reinforce cybersecurity. When hackers are initiating their criminal career, they are called script-kiddies, usually young novices who seek to gain status in the

hacker community with their illicit activities (Holt, 2007). And if they have a socio-political agenda, hackers are often called hacktivists (Romagna, 2020). Others simply hate labels. In any case, it is rare that criminal hackers only do hacking. More often they perform a range of malicious activities such as writing malware to encrypt data, or infecting botnets to carry out DDoS attacks, either individually or as part of a criminal organization. Within criminal organizations, hackers can have different roles: from executors of technical tasks to enablers for those who do not have sufficient technical knowledge (e.g., Leukfeldt & Holt, 2022). This is why researching hackers often overlaps with researching cybercriminals.

3 Phases of Fieldwork

Over the last few decades, criminologists have had to adapt to new forms of crime, offenders with unique characteristics, and online environments where crime occurs, hence developing new methodologies for online fieldwork (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Lavorgna & Holt, 2021). Based on our experience, here we explain a series of standard fieldwork phases for researching cybercriminals that range from initial reconnaissance to contact with the subjects.

3.1 *Understand the Hacker Subculture*

Hackers are not like other cybercriminals. Think of the average scammer, for example; they will generally share neither motivations, nor skills, and possibly not even sociodemographic background with hackers. Many hackers do not even consider themselves offenders (e.g., Holt, 2007), and they have their own ethics (Levy, 1984). Their belief system articulates around technology, knowledge, and secrecy (for a review see Holt, 2020). It was not until the late twentieth century that hackers began to be portrayed as criminals (Taylor, 1999).

The first challenge for researchers is therefore to define what hacking is. Currently, the illegality of hacking is determined in many legislations by whether or not hackers have permission to trespass a system (Wall, 2001; Yar & Steinmetz, 2019). This puts even white-hat hackers in a difficult position that may deter them from carrying out cybersecurity exercises, such as bug bounties (Del-Real & Rodriguez Mesa, 2022). It is therefore a thin line that separates black from white which often situates hacking in a gray area. Other works adopt broader definitions beyond mere legal considerations (e.g., Schell & Dodge, 2002; Steinmetz, 2015). Researchers must keep this in mind when dealing with hackers and also when interpreting their research data.

3.2 *Take Care of Legal and Cybersecurity Issues*

Before contacting cybercriminals or others associated with them, it is important to adopt minimum privacy and cybersecurity protection measures. The coverage of these measures must be in accordance with the research design and reach all actors involved: researchers, subjects, third parties (e.g., police, consultancy), and their institutions. It must be also noted that an aggressive reaction from a single hacker in response to the researchers' approach can cause significant disruption. It is therefore advisable to consider at least two aspects when collecting and storing data securely: complying with legal requirements and using appropriate infrastructure and materials.

Researchers can prepare legal documents to agree in advance on elements such as the explicit consent of the subjects to participate in the research; the nondisclosure of sensitive information; the form and limits of the collaboration between the parties; and the type of data that will be collected and shared: where, how and until when they will be stored, who will have access to them, and the conditions under which, if applicable, they will be published. In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulates the processing and movement, as well as the protection, of data of individuals (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016). Some institutions have Data Protection Officers who can guide the researcher throughout this whole process.

Many research designs rely on infrastructure to collect data. For example, interviews may require a private space and hardware such as an encrypted voice recorder. Other studies may require the use of infrastructure such as computer labs with specific software to collect data (e.g., video, keylogger), antivirus software to protect the institution, or VPN to add a layer of anonymity. Note that the use of VPN can be a double-edged sword: although it can be a means of protection, participants might get suspicious with it. In fact, a VPN can be seen as a tool used by law enforcement agencies to mask their real location and would therefore trigger a red flag, immediately undermining the relationship between interviewer and interviewee to the point of keeping away possible respondents.

3.3 *Find the Population of Study*

It is precisely the secrecy mentioned above that makes it difficult to contact cybercriminals for research, let alone hackers. Difficult is not impossible though. There are online environments—such as forums, chats, and social media—where cybercriminals socialize with their peers and share knowledge (Leukfeldt et al., 2017a, b). A few examples are Hack Forums, Reddit, and Telegram. Not all cyber places are equally public (Miró-Llinares & Johnson, 2018; Moneva, 2020), and it is probably in the most private places where the most experienced cybercriminals are to be found and where communication is most free. Sometimes it is also possible to

contact offenders who are in contact with the criminal justice system because they are serving a rehabilitative sentence; for example, through probation services or participation in educational programs (Schiks et al., 2021). The problem with this strategy is that samples tend to overrepresent novice hackers or script-kiddies and underrepresent more experienced cybercriminals who have not been identified or arrested.

When researchers are unable to recruit actual cybercriminals, they often resort to convenience samples with similar sociodemographic characteristics and expertise, usually represented by IT experts or students (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Marcum et al., 2014). Although some researchers question the external validity of the results obtained with such samples, others argue that they are adequate for studying topics like cybercrime involvement (see Chua & Holt, 2016).

3.4 Engage with Cybercriminals

Different cybercriminals require different ways to establish contact. When reaching out for hackers, the best way is to look for them either in hacking forums or on social media. The next step is to establish rapport. This process can take a long time because cybercriminals are wary of new users and introducing oneself as a researcher is not helpful either. Having a public profile linked to several sources can make it easier for cybercriminals to verify your identity and not consider you a threat. Talking about common interests, news, and trivial facts can also help. Signs that rapport has been established are, for example, when respondents start making jokes and referring to their private life. Once a solid relationship is established, hackers are then more likely to refer the researcher to other hackers, thus enabling a snowball sampling process. The main issue with hackers is that they are extremely suspicious and might not be interested in answering questions, particularly if researchers do not have a basic knowledge of the topics to address (Hutchings & Holt, 2018). Others, like hacktivists, tend to like visibility and are therefore more open to talk. Hacktivists are relatively easy to contact on social media such as X (previously Twitter), Facebook, and Telegram, especially if the researchers already have an active account.

We have contacted 120 potential hacktivists through social media (in some cases, we used the email addresses left on defaced websites). Of these, 50 replied, and 34 agreed to participate in interviews, for a response rate of 28.3%. Note that the platforms through which we contacted them were not necessarily the same ones through which we conducted the interviews, the latter being generally more private channels such as Telegram, Signal, and Wire (Romagna & Leukfeldt, 2023). Transparency is another important matter when contacting hackers, but it does not always yield positive results. If transparent communication fails when studying illicit online markets, researchers may need to adopt the fictitious position of an interested buyer to get information on the sellers. In such case, ethical considerations regarding deception must be addressed.

After a successful first contact, researchers must inform participants about the purpose of the research, specifying who will participate and be able to access the data collected; how the data will be treated and anonymized; what tools will be used to contact them; and an estimate of the time needed to complete and review the interview (Seidman, 2019). It would be wise to use specific devices to perform this type of research and avoid opening files sent by participants, as they can easily hide malware in them. This can be a problem if participants send their own responses in, for example, a Word or PDF file. In these cases, it may be wise to have them send the responses in plain text in the body of the email. Researchers must also inform participants of their right to withdraw from the research and to have their data deleted, and of the possible risks the research might entail.

4 Techniques Employed

Below we describe our experience in applying seven techniques to research cybercriminals, addressing questions such as what the technique involves, what kind of measures it collects, how time-consuming it is, what type of insights it provides, what kind of samples it usually allows to collect, what skills it requires, and whether it is intrusive or not. We close this section with a structured overview of the characteristics of the techniques.

4.1 Interviews

Interviews—whether unstructured, semi-structured, or structured—serve to gather in-depth information about the perceptions of respondents on a particular topic. Researchers can interview cybercriminals offline and online (Hutchings & Holt, 2018). We have reached hackers both ways and we found no magic recipe for them to accept an interview. In our experience, the most important factor is usually trust, either built over time or fostered by a referral. In the case of online interviews, the use of encrypted communication channels can also help convince respondents. Note that cybercriminals may make statements that are not verifiable, try to impress the interviewer by exaggerating their activities or downplaying them, or agree with the interviewer to have an easy and accommodating conversation rather than a challenging one. Interviews are time-consuming, especially when respondents are hard-to-reach or have limited time.

Usually, offline interviews take less time and are richer than online interviews because of the additional information that emerges from the conversation (e.g., body language, tone of voice). Offline interviews with hackers usually take between 3 and 5 h. In contrast, online interviews with hacktivists can extend over days or even weeks in a series of short sessions of about 30 min due the time it takes to type and the availability of respondents (note that interviewees may multitask, or live in

a different time zone) (Romagna & Leukfeldt, 2023). Such breaks interrupt the conversation, but they also allow the interviewer to verify responses, ask additional questions or seek clarification, and give respondents more time to reflect on their answers (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). In online interviews, respondents may get lazy and end up with simple answers. This is often the case over email, but live chats allow for much more depth. For example, since respondents do not have to type in their response when exchanging audio messages through instant messaging applications such as Signal, Telegram, and WhatsApp, the information they provide is more detailed—similar to that collected in offline interviews. Audio files also allow us to evaluate the tone of voice and emotions of respondents (e.g., irony, anger, sadness). The downside is that it takes a long time to listen to and transcribe the audio. Although software approximates automatic transcription, it is often not accurate and requires revision. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, software must be secure, validated, and reliable, so it is generally not safe to use free versions.

Interviewers should be friendly and open, and be willing to humor the interviewee. While it is necessary to keep control of the conversation, some digressions should be allowed. These help to strengthen the bond with the respondent, especially since it is often not possible to have any face-to-face or even visual contact (Salmons, 2014). A certain knowledge of the field helps to follow the conversation, especially when the language becomes particularly technical, but it is also helpful to ask for clarification (Seidman, 2019). While cybercriminals are not always happy to explain certain things—such as the techniques and tools they use, the exact number of people involved in an operation, their actual location, and the ways they meet other cybercriminals and share information—they may like the idea of teaching someone else certain concepts or skills or simply directing the interviewer to the right information.

Note that it is usually not possible to generalize interview results. Our samples are usually around 25 respondents, but even though hackers are hard-to-reach populations, such figures are not sufficient to draw general conclusions. In such cases, we apply the saturation principle: once the answers become more and more similar and hardly add anything new, we assume that other respondents would be in the same line of thinking (Seidman, 2019).

4.2 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are measurement instruments used to collect information from respondents in a standardized manner and can be administered offline or online. The advantage of the online route is that reaching a large sample is cost-effective. For this purpose, researchers often resort to companies that curate panels of respondents, or to online platforms where the target population interacts. In both cases, the representativeness of the sample is often problematic due to self-selection bias. In addition, researchers should keep in mind that often the most interesting populations (e.g., hackers) are also the least accessible. Sometimes it can be useful to offer

an incentive for participation. For example, Weulen Kranenbarg (2021) offered a €50 incentive to 928 cybercrime suspects to report their cyber offending in a survey and, after two reminders, achieved a response rate of 28.9%—which was higher than the 16.1% response rate she obtained from traditional crime suspects. Together with interviews, questionnaires and surveys are the data collection method par excellence in the social sciences and as such have been used extensively in cyber-crime research, mainly to collect subjective measures of behavior such as self-reported offending (e.g., Marcum et al., 2014), but in some cases also objective ones such as IT skills (e.g., Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2021).

The difference between the two is that subjective measures rely on the perception of the respondents, while objective measures capture their performance. While subjective measures allow us to collect, for example, what respondents think about what their behavior, knowledge, or skills are, objective measures can be used to measure their actual dimension. This is an important distinction, as a recent systematic review and meta-analysis shows that subjective online behavioral measures are only moderately related to objective ones (Parry et al., 2021). The validity of objective measures is therefore considered better.

Some of the most common subjective measures refer to the prevalence of behaviors such as offending or victimization in a given period of time and usually follow the formula: “In the last 12 months, how often have you performed/experienced [behavior]?” or “Have you ever performed/experienced [behavior]?”. As an example of objective measures, researchers developed a 10-item questionnaire in collaboration with the Dutch National Police to measure the objective IT skills of a sample of cyber-dependent crime suspects (Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2021). Similarly, we captured the objective online behavior of a representative sample from the Netherlands using an online questionnaire in which respondents were presented with a series of cyber risky situations to resolve (van ’t Hoff-de Goede et al., 2019). This strategy served to measure the strength of passwords used by respondents, software downloads, clicks on pop-up windows, personal information shared online, and interactions with email attachments and hyperlinks.

4.3 *Monitoring Software*

Monitoring software is a broad term used to encompass everything from session-only tracking mechanisms, to video recording, to fingerprinting methods that serve to capture the objective activity of a user on a computer (for reviews see Bujlow et al., 2017; Fourie & Bothma, 2007). Monitoring software can capture all kinds of data from users, such as the activities they perform online and locally (e.g., websites visited, programs run), when they do so, and their keystrokes while at it. The insights it provides are unique.

Research designs that collect measurements with monitoring software generally require infrastructure such as computers or computer labs in addition to the software itself—which is usually paid for. The installation and maintenance of this setup

requires IT skills, so we recommend collaborating with computer scientists. Data collected through monitoring software may require complex preprocessing to prepare it for analysis if it is stored in unstructured or semi-structured formats such as plain text. So in these cases, data science skills are a good asset.

Combined with cybersecurity educational exercises, such as capture the flag (CTF) (Švábenský et al., 2021), monitoring software may reveal insights into the decision-making process of individuals with high IT skills when faced with cybersecurity challenges similar to those encountered by hackers in the real world (Moneva et al., 2022c). This is an innovative method for researchers who want to collect objective online behavioral measures in cybercrime contexts. However, preparing CTFs is often a costly task that requires setting up a lab, recruiting participants, designing a cybersecurity exercise, and collecting data. This means that depending on available resources, data collection can take several months. Good planning is, therefore, essential. Samples collected with this design are usually small as they are limited by the number of computers available with the monitoring software. For example, the computer lab we used at The Hague University of Applied Sciences had two rooms, with 54 computers in total. We recruited 72 participants for seven data collection rounds over 2 days, each hosting between three and 14 participants (Moneva et al., 2022c). As for the type of participants that can be recruited through CTFs, the existing IT infrastructure at university departments, along with the technical students that many have, makes it practical to start with these convenience samples. The most valuable samples include IT security experts, white hat hackers and, ideally, black hat hackers. Because of the skills of the participants, it is important to take security measures seriously and use controlled online environments for the CTFs in case participants attack the IT infrastructure. Virtual machines provide an additional layer of protection that can prove invaluable.

4.4 Online Ads as Honeypots

Criminologists often use honeypots to better understand cybercriminal behavior (Perkins & Howell, 2021). Honeypots are computer tools designed to attract Internet users to interact with them and collect the data this interaction generates (Spitzner, 2002). Honeypots can take many forms: computer networks, websites, social media accounts, or online ads, among many others.

One of the main advantages of honeypots is that they can capture objective online behavior. For example, a honeypot network can capture trespassing attempts (Maimon et al., 2014), and a honeypot email account can capture communications with offenders (Maimon et al., 2020). And since honeypots are generally released in the wild, they can capture large volumes of interactions, which often results in large samples. Depending on the environment where they are released, honeypots will attract a different population: a fake barely legal pornography website (Prichard et al., 2021) will not attract the same users as online ads to prevent DDoS attacks on the gaming industry (Moneva et al., 2022a), nor the same as money mule

recruitment messages (Bekkers & Leukfeldt, 2022). Researchers need to think in advance which population they want to attract before choosing the most suitable honeypot.

The measures that a honeypot collects vary depending on its design. This means that, with the appropriate skills, it is possible to design a honeypot that collects custom measures. While creating a honeypot can require extensive IT skills, using third-party infrastructure or software is often less demanding in this sense. When designing and using honeypots, it is important to consider the activity of bots online. Without proper filters, bots can alter the data collected and thus affect the results (Perkins & Howell, 2021; see also Vetterl, 2020). For example, a repeated count of intrusion attempts may be due to bot activity and not necessarily to humans. It is not always necessary, however, to build a honeypot from scratch; it is also possible to use existing tools as honeypots. For example, we used the advertisement tools from Google and Meta to deliver targeted online ads to populations at risk of getting involved in cybercrime (Bekkers et al., 2022; Moneva et al., 2022a). These solutions allowed us to trade the resources that setting up the infrastructure would have required in exchange for using a set of predefined measurements. If the predefined measures happen to be the ones that the researchers need—as was the case—this is not a problem. Researchers using third-party tools must accept their terms and conditions of use which may be relevant to data processing and privacy issues. For example, Google must adhere to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016) when collecting and processing user data from the Netherlands.

4.5 *Analysis of Secondary Data (Zone-H)*

Secondary data are those collected by someone other than the researchers who will use them. This means that researchers have no control over the method of collection or the information contained in them (Bookstaver, 2021). Their analysis, therefore, constitutes a nonintrusive research technique. When using secondary data, it is important to contact the data collectors to gain insights; we in fact discovered some particularities in doing so.

One of the most popular sources of secondary data on hacking is the Zone-H Defacement Archive¹ (see Romagna & Van den Hout, 2017). In Zone-H, alleged hackers—or groups of hackers—self-report their defacement activity under a nickname, providing evidence via the URL of the defaced website and selecting from a drop-down menu the method of intrusion used and their motivation. Researchers can contact the database administrators to purchase a data dump with the desired coverage (e.g., temporal, territorial)—the cost of which varies according to the request—and analyze it to answer their research questions. In this way, it is possible

¹ See <http://www.zone-h.org/>. Last accessed on February 27, 2023.

to access millions of hacking records. Once received, data require little cleaning and the variables they contain are intuitive, making them easy data to work with and requiring standard data analysis skills. We used Zone-H data to test repeat victimization premises (Moneva et al., 2022b), the routine activities approach and target suitability (Holt et al., 2020), and identify defacer trajectories (van de Weijer et al., 2021).

However, the Zone-H data have a particular characteristic that is important to note. In order to protect certain domains from being repeatedly targeted as a result of appearing on the Zone-H public listing, the administrators imposed a 1-year restriction on reregistering a defaced domain, thus altering the statistical distribution of defacements (Moneva et al., 2022b). The second, more obvious, is that the timestamp of each observation does not correspond to the time at which the defacement occurred, but corresponds to its reporting and recording, which usually follows a verification process of 1 or 2 weeks. Both aspects have obvious limitations for data analysis and modeling that are important to take into account.

4.6 *Qualitative Analysis of Criminal Investigations*

Criminal investigations by the police inform criminal trials and have been used to shed light on cybercriminals and their activities (Leukfeldt & Kleemans, 2021). These police investigations provide unique in-depth knowledge because of the use of intrusive investigative methods such as wiretaps and IP taps, observations, undercover policing, and house searches.

The Dutch Organized Crime Monitor was established in the mid-90s in the Netherlands to enable academic research into organized crime. The monitor includes closed police cases on a broad cross-section of organized crime (see Kleemans, 2014), whose information can be systematically analyzed using checklists (e.g., Kruisbergen et al., 2019; Leukfeldt & Holt, 2022). The checklists we used covered: the police investigation and the investigation process; the criminal network; the criminal activities and *modus operandi*; contacts with the licit and illicit environment; criminal proceeds, investments, expenditures, money laundering, and seized assets; the judicial procedure and verdict; and the evaluation (i.e., lessons learned, new insights, prevention opportunities, new developments, and effectiveness of policing strategies). Unfortunately, not all countries grant academics access to police cases. Alternatively, cases can be reconstructed based on the use of publicly available court cases and structured interviews with police officers, prosecutors, and other relevant people (Leukfeldt et al., 2017c). While this does not provide researchers with the raw data (e.g., transcripts of taped conversations or chat logs), interviews with investigators—who in some cases have been investigating criminal groups for years—provide an in-depth understanding of the criminal networks and their members.

Case reconstructions have some distinct advantages over the analysis of police investigations. First, police cases do not always contain all relevant information

Table 27.1 Overview of the techniques employed

Technique	Measures collected	Time investment	Sample size	Skills required	Intrusive	Insights
Interviews	Subjective	High	Small	Qualitative	Yes	In-depth knowledge
Questionnaires	Objective and subjective	Low	Medium	Quantitative, qualitative	Yes	Standardized measures
Monitoring software	Objective	High	Small to medium	IT, quantitative	Yes	Interdisciplinary work, requires infrastructure
Online ads as honeypots	Objective	Medium	Large	IT, quantitative	Yes	Requires infrastructure, targets populations
Analysis of secondary data (Zone-H)	Objective and subjective	Low	Large	Quantitative, qualitative	No	Verified by admins, mirrored defacements, data gaps
Qualitative analysis of criminal investigations	Objective and subjective	High	Small to medium	Qualitative	No	Police investigations, court documents, expert knowledge

about criminal networks, as cases focus on collecting evidence. Relevant knowledge about, for example, the social ties or offender convergence settings may not be part of the police file, but is often known to the respondents. The opposite is also true: Police cases may contain sensitive information that is not always of interest for academic purposes. Finally, interviews make it possible to include the most recent cases, as “closing” criminal investigations can take long.

4.7 Overview

Table 27.1 provides a summary overview of the techniques presented above.

5 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

This section focuses on the ethical and emotional aspects on which we have been advised by criminological ethics committees. For the general ethical challenges of cybercrime research (i.e., privacy and other legal issues, informed consent, protecting the participants and researchers), see (Castro-Toledo & Miró-Llinares, 2021). In our experience, compared to generic ethics committees, a criminological ethics committee is likely to be more aware of the complexities of criminological research

and understand the use of more intrusive methodologies when justified. We recommend consulting these specialized committees.

5.1 Preserving Anonymity and Confidentiality

Sometimes it can be tempting to use the nicknames that cybercriminals use on social media, forums, or marketplaces to apply an additional layer of reality to our research. We may also deem it enlightening to use verbatim quotes from the contents they publish publicly or share privately. Since the nicknames are not real names, it may give the impression that the subjects already enjoy sufficient anonymity. However, some people use the same nicknames across different platforms—and the same applies to the people with whom they communicate—which can be used to triangulate information available online to reduce or eliminate their anonymity. To ensure the anonymity of the subjects, nicknames should always be anonymized and their messages paraphrased (Hutchings & Holt, 2018). Note that this is a two-way street. Researchers may also expose their own safety by revealing their identity to participants, which creates various tensions that may affect the personal and professional sphere (Lavorgna & Sugiura, 2022).

In addition, if we monitor the activity of cybercriminals or collect information they shared nonpublicly, we may pick up sensitive information in the process, such as real names, email accounts, or passwords. As soon as this information is detected, it should be deleted (Hutchings & Holt, 2018). Researchers must ensure that the information provided by the participant is not leaked and take into consideration details such as isolation of space, encryption of files, access to workspaces and computers, and data storage. These are just two examples—each setup requires specific attention.

5.2 Identifying Minors

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine if a person is underage. This is much more difficult online. In ideal circumstances, researchers will try to obtain proof of age through some official document. This is possible when, for example, subjects have gone through the justice system, as the police will collect such information. However, when contacting cybercriminals in the wild, this is highly problematic. It is likely that subjects will never reveal their true age or will reveal a false age. Some subjects may not take kindly to a request that their parents or legal guardians sign an informed consent form in their place, which may result in the loss of a valuable and often already scarce sample. When in doubt, investigators will be faced with the dilemma of whether to proceed with the research at all. In such cases, we recommend that researchers always treat subjects as minors.

5.3 Deceiving Cybercriminals with Honeypots

Researchers deploy honeypots to collect objective behavioral data from online users. For honeypots to be effective, they must mimic computer systems such as networks, websites, or ads, which are of interest to the target population (e.g., cybercriminals). This often involves deception and data collection without consent, which raises ethical concerns (Castro-Toledo & Gómez-Bellvís, [in press](#)). The reason researchers continue to resort to this design is that warning participants that the honeypot is not a real system and asking for their consent to collect their data would invalidate the research design. No cybercriminal would interact with the honeypot, so researchers would not be able to study their behavior in a realistic online scenario. This would have serious consequences for cybercrime prevention and cybersecurity, as the behavioral measures collected would be inaccurate and the conclusions drawn, therefore, flawed.

Faced with this ethical dilemma, Castro-Toledo and Gómez-Bellvís ([in press](#)) propose three conditions for the use of honeypots in online deviance research: that they serve to address a problem of public interest like cybercrime prevention, that there is no methodology better suited to answer the research question, and that the honeypot is fully simulated. Although we believe that cybercrime researchers usually meet all three conditions, it is important to always keep them in mind.

5.4 Witnessing Serious Cybercrimes

During the course of the research, researchers may access websites, forums, or marketplaces where cybercriminals commit crimes or engage in deviant behaviors. Often, finding these sites is easier than it seems and there is no need to visit the dark web. In most cases, depending on the objective of the investigation, such crimes will be financially motivated and will consist of transactions of information (e.g., personal data, software) and objects (e.g., drugs, weapons) in exchange for money. In some cases, researchers may witness situations that affect them emotionally, such as the trade of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM). We recommend that researchers seek psychological help if they expect to be confronted with these situations or if they have been affected by them.

Researchers may also consider reporting certain crimes to the police (Rauhala & Kalokairinou, [2021](#)). Sometimes respondents talk about crimes they have committed or will commit. We advise to explicitly ask respondents not to disclose or discuss possible illegal activities they plan in the future (see also Hutchings & Holt, [2018](#)).

5.5 *Keeping a Professional Distance*

One risk that researchers may encounter, especially in long and emotionally demanding projects, is the risk of going native and getting too caught up in the dynamics of the population under study. Especially when interviews go on for a long time, researchers may develop an unexpected friendship with participants. In such cases, researchers should be aware that any new information obtained could be biased. Participants may even forget that they are part of a study and provide information in confidence. Should researchers wish to obtain new information for their study from their now-friend, they should keep a professional distance. Sometimes it is also difficult to detach from these relationships, especially when the respondent is strongly attached to them. In such situations, it is necessary to proceed with a constant but slow process of distancing, to avoid hurting the respondent's feelings. This process must be carefully calculated, especially in the case of cybercriminals, because retaliation can be dangerous. However, if researchers and participants agree to maintain contact, participants can become a source of information and gatekeepers for future research. Clear communication is key to acting appropriately if research activity resumes.

6 **Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives**

6.1 *Lessons Learned*

Interviews Hackers are a particular type of cybercriminals who have a specific perception of themselves and their activities. They often follow a cultural and ethical code that may conflict with that of society and justify their actions by claiming to pursue a greater purpose (e.g., fight enemies, help people). They may describe their activities as a good challenge or just plain fun, without trying to avoid judgment for their questionable actions. Once trust is established, hackers can be friendly and helpful, fun and open to dialogue, often willing to provide answers and chat, guiding the investigator through the intricacies of their activities. They also claim to be busy people and sometimes it is necessary to send reminders for a meeting or an interview, but—in general—they have proven to be polite and even friendly. In fact, hackers are often available at unexpected hours, as many are engaged in hacking as a sideline and therefore only have time during evening hours or on weekends.

Hackers can also be extremely suspicious, so it is advisable to communicate with them openly, using mutually trusted tools that cannot be used as attack vectors. Therefore, sending attachments via email or chat is not something hackers like to do. Lying about or masking part of your research is also not advisable. Researchers should also expect a thorough search of their digital persona, as hackers will likely try to verify their identity. Affiliations with certain institutions, such as law enforcement, can cause problems and keep respondents at bay, and should always be clearly

introduced at the beginning of the research. Note that, depending on the activities they engage in, like hacktivism or crime, some hackers will be more willing to talk than others.

Questionnaires Adequately motivating respondents is essential to count on their cooperation in filling out questionnaires reliably. For example, IT security students may value extra points on an assignment more than a modest amount of money as compensation. Likewise, if any IT savvy respondents find that our IT skills module contains errors or is inadequate to measure their skill level, they may also perceive that the researchers lack expertise to conduct the study, which may in turn diminish their legitimacy in the eyes of the respondents. Despite possible incentives offered for their participation in the research, some respondents will lack the motivation or patience to complete the often tedious questionnaires that academics prepare. In these cases, respondents might rush through the items by selecting random options or skipping entire questions. These are the speeders. This is why it is always advisable to collect the response times of the respondents to detect speeders in case all our efforts to motivate them were in vain.

Online questionnaires are susceptible to technical problems such as loss of Internet connection or questions not displaying correctly. These problems are difficult to spot when administered remotely and will only be detected in the data (if at all) when it is too late to solve them. Whenever possible, we advise that the researchers accompany the respondents during the exercise. If this is not possible, simply acknowledge that this can happen.

Monitoring Software Setting up computer labs with monitoring software is an arduous task—and, to a lesser extent, so is setting up individual workstations. These labs are often guided by strict cybersecurity policies to protect the institutions that host them. The technicians in charge of running these labs are responsible for their security. They are the ones who best know the equipment and the ins and outs of the system. These technicians may be reluctant to install new software on the machines and may require you to verify that they do not possess any harm. In addition, computer labs are often in high demand, usually for educational exercises, so it is advisable to reserve a time slot for the study well in advance. Some labs are open to students, so it is important to control access to prevent any unwary person from interfering with the research.

Despite the invaluable help of the technicians, considering the complex setup required for this type of research, it is very likely that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong. We recommend being thorough and conducting pilot studies that test each stage of the research. It may also be wise to consider several data collection rounds rather than concentrating all participants in a single session in case something does go wrong (e.g., someone is late, changes workstations, or cheats).

Online Ads as Honey pots Researchers often insist on building their own tools to collect research data. But this effort does not always pay off. There are data collection tools out there, or data themselves, that can be useful in cybercrime research. Sometimes academics are reluctant to use tools designed by third parties

for transparency reasons; if we do not know exactly how they work, we reject them. But there are tools that have extensive documentation on how they work that may not be completely comprehensive, but may be comprehensive enough. We believe that these technologies should be embraced rather than rejected, especially if they are already being used by stakeholders or policy makers, as in the case of Google Ads. In such cases, researchers can not only take advantage of their usefulness, but also act as impartial evaluators. Our thorough research may help detect flaws in their design that—at worst—can inform their users, or features that—at best—enable future research.

When using a new technology, it is important to understand it thoroughly. In addition to any documentation available, commercial software often has support staff that can answer many questions. Alternatively, researchers can hire third parties who are experts in such technologies to handle data collection on their behalf. While this may sometimes be the only option, we recommend that researchers maintain close contact with these teams and supervise them in the process, as the experts may know the technology, but probably not the details of the research design. For example, while it is possible to collect a lot of data with Google Ads, it may be necessary to apply some filters; the goal is not to get a lot of data, but to get the right data. Google Ads' interface can be overwhelming for new users, so expert help in such cases may prove useful.

Analysis of Secondary Data (Zone-H) Often the secondary data are clean and ready to use. The best datasets come with detailed codebooks. But these datasets are scarce. In some cases, the data also hold secrets. For example, the name of a variable may suggest that it measures one thing, but it actually measures something else; the data collection process may have particularities that are not explained in detail anywhere, but are crucial for interpreting the data. Contacting the Zone-H administrators was extremely useful in our research, as they had insights about the data that were not reflected in the documentation and had not been reported in previous research. We always recommend going to the source in case of doubts, to avoid misinterpretations. In the end, data without context are meaningless.

Qualitative Analysis of Criminal Investigations Police cases offer unique data that provide insight into a criminal world which is normally hidden. Because of their special investigative powers, law enforcement agencies are able to observe criminal activities, log online and offline conversations, and analyze material on seized computers and servers. There is no doubt that these insights are hard to get using other methods. Besides some obvious limitations like bias in the type of offenders and crimes, and the limited number of cases available, time is an important factor when analyzing police data. First, strict procedures lengthen the access time for police data. In the Netherlands, these procedures can take between 3 and 9 months, depending on how many applications there are. And applying does not guarantee access. Second, once access is granted, it takes time to identify relevant cases (usually archived in different cities all over the country) and it may take days or weeks to analyze a single case, depending on the length of the investigation or the special powers used. An alternative we used over the past decade are 'case reconstructions'.

Instead of analyzing actual police data, cases are identified based on news report and interviews with law enforcement agencies. Each case has a district attorney and one or two law enforcement agents responsible for large parts of the criminal investigation. Interviewing these persons in combination with analyzing publicly available documents, like court documents and press releases, also provides relevant information about criminal networks and their members.

6.2 *Methodological Perspectives*

Innovation and Good Old Tradition Innovation is what advances science, but tradition is what sustains it. New methodologies and analysis techniques open the door to new perspectives and interpretations of reality, but we cannot abandon the valuable traditional methods that produce reliable knowledge. It may seem that, when it comes to investigating cybercriminals, web scraping and big data are the only options for conducting research. Not only is this not true, but it can produce a distorted picture of reality. For example, the insights that investigators obtain from big scraped forum data can show how buyers and sellers relate to each other in an illicit cybercrime market ecosystem, but without examining the criminal investigations that law enforcement conducts, we will only be exposed to the information that cybercriminals share and not what they hide. Similarly, experiments with IoT honeypots may reveal new patterns of behavior of previously unknown hackers, but it will be very difficult to understand their decision making process with respect to trespassing if we do not interview them. Inevitably, strong methodological preferences create biases and knowledge gaps that must be compensated for. Therefore, we believe that for the field to thrive, it is necessary to combine innovative and traditional research. This does not mean that every researcher should do both, but that there should be specialists in both.

Interdisciplinarity That cybercrime research benefits from the connections established between different disciplines of the social and computer sciences is something that has been recurrently acknowledged in the scientific literature (Holt, 2017; Maimon & Louderback, 2019). To draw a complete picture of cybercriminals, researchers must be able to grasp their human dimension and understand the technology they use, which immediately involves aspects of criminology, psychology, sociology, IT security, and engineering, among others. Some of the most ambitious research designs, like those involving computer labs and monitoring software, and honeypots, are interdisciplinary by definition and require interdisciplinary teams to unfold their full potential. In these scenarios, criminologists may benefit from collaborating with software engineers to develop software to collect data and with IT security researchers to interpret the modus operandi of cybercriminals. Considering the current state of the field, it is likely that many of the innovations in cybercrime research will come from interdisciplinary collaborations that apply knowledge from one discipline to the field of study of another.

Objective Measures of Online Behavior To obtain insights about cybercriminals, due to the difficulty of accessing trustworthy information, researchers have largely relied on self-reported data, usually through interviews and questionnaires. These data have helped propel the field forward by providing important insights into why and how cybercriminals engage in cybercrime, as well as what the risk factors are for such behavior. However, recent synthesis research has shown that self-reported or subjective measures of online behavior are only moderately correlated with objective measures (Parry et al., 2021). To gain more accurate insights on cyber offending, it is necessary to add objective measures to our repertoire, like questionnaires, monitoring software, honeypots, and criminal investigations, observation, and web scraping.

A Plea for Replicability and Reproducibility In recent decades, researchers noted a replication crisis in psychology that likely extends to criminology and the social sciences at large (Pridemore et al., 2018). Some practices may improve replicability, such as “increasing sample size, pre registering studies, improving rigor and transparency, sharing materials and primary data, conducting replications, and enhancing error detection and correction” (Nosek et al., 2022, p. 735). It may seem that these practices only concern quantitative research designs, but they also apply to qualitative ones. Although, for example, reproducing the transcript of an interview with a cybercriminal is virtually impossible, it can be argued that it is still possible to increase the replicability of qualitative research by following some of the practices listed above. For example, one can increase the number of interviewees, pre-register research questions and analysis techniques, share anonymized transcripts, and repeat interviews on a new sample. Transparency and rigor in the interpretation of transcripts can also aid in error detection and correction. This discussion transcends research on cybercriminals, but certainly affects it. We believe that research institutions should promote a culture of change among researchers to adopt these good and open science practices to build a strong field on reliable evidence that gains the trust of practitioners, professionals, and policy makers.

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Chapter 28

Hidden Platforms for Cybercrime: Experiences Investigating Darknet Services



Matthew Ball and Roderic Broadhurst 

1 Experiences Investigating Darknet Services

The criminal use of the darknet entered the public consciousness in 2011 following a media publication about the infamous Silk Road 1.0 (Chen, 2011). The merging of sophisticated technologies created the perfect infrastructure for the development of illicit online markets and discussion spaces. Combining anonymous Internet browsing, cryptocurrencies, and global delivery systems, darknet markets (i.e. illicit cryptomarkets) emerged and transformed the retailing of illicit products and contraband, as well as the discussion of illicit activities. Doing research into this ‘hidden’ universe is fraught with challenges and the risk of exposure to abhorrent materials, hacks, and scams. Security and ethical requirements add further demands. This chapter provides a summary of what these darknet services (i.e. darknet markets and darknet forums) look like, the methodological techniques a researcher may use to study them, and the ethical and emotional challenges associated with studying these illicit spaces. The emergence of reliable and replicable data collection methods able to fully capture these evolving darknet markets and forums remains a work in progress.

This chapter describes our team’s research on illicit darknet markets and darknet forums. Each market or forum exhibits their own design variations, quirks, and challenges that often require a customised approach to data collection. While darknet markets are rich in quantitative data, and we can produce descriptive statistics representing those data, it is difficult to reason *about* those data. This is due to the nature of the darknet platform, tracking users is inherently flawed, tracking purchases is likewise difficult, although in both cases, some data can be approximated. Darknet forums are qualitatively rich in textual data. However, observing and

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interpreting these forums is very labour-intensive, but reveals attitudes, trends, and habits among these ‘hidden’ populations.

The online world has long had a history of illicit transactions. The first reported online transaction took place in 1972 and involved a small amount of cannabis sent between students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and students at Stanford University using their respective ARPANET accounts (Bartlett, 2014). This technological evolution reached its peak in February of 2011 with the launch of Silk Road 1.0 – introducing the modern darknet market.¹ These online marketplaces, accessible only through specialised software which connects to ‘hidden’ networks, are e-commerce style websites specialising in the sale and distribution of illicit products and contraband. Typical products offered on darknet markets include prohibited drugs, pharmaceuticals, fraudulent/identity documents, malware and exploit kits, counterfeit goods, and other contraband. Specialist markets offering pornographic material (including child sexual abuse material [CSAM]) and weapons occur. Darknet markets feature three main actors: vendors, buyers, and market administrators (Celestini et al., 2016). Buyers can leave reviews, message vendors, and dispute transactions. Vendors provide product listings with basic descriptions and details such as quantities, prices, and shipping services. Market administrators provide overall supervision of the service (e.g. dispute resolution) and market operation. Darknet markets levy a commission, typically ranging from 3% to 8%, from each sale, and provide escrow services.

Darknet markets have created problems for law enforcement agencies (LEAs) across the world. The combination of online anonymity, pseudo-anonymous transactions, and sophisticated stealth packaging has created a novel environment that inhibits LEAs ability to investigate the activities of darknet markets. In the past decade, LEAs have attempted to curb development and expansion of these darknet markets, and at least 20 (publicly acknowledged) law enforcement operations have focused on their suppression and remain to be fully explored by qualitative researchers. Due to the worldwide connectivity of the Internet, these operations have typically involved cross-jurisdictional cooperation between LEAs and collaboration in the form of intelligence sharing and joint operations.

2 History of Darknet Platforms and Research

The most common ‘version’ of the darknet is that found via the Tor² service network, although other networks exist for hiding communications and services such as i2p³ (Invisible Internet Project) and Freenet.⁴ Though research into these alternate

¹ Arguably the first iteration was ‘The Farmer’s Market’ – launched around 2006 – but this market did not utilise cryptocurrencies.

² See: <https://www.torproject.org/>

³ See: <https://geti2p.net/en/>

⁴ See: <https://freenetproject.org/index.html>

darknets does exist (e.g. Hoang et al., 2018; Figueras-Martín et al., 2022), due to the limited size and diversity of these alternate platforms, the focus of this chapter is on the Tor service network.

2.1 *The Darknet: The Onion Router (Tor)*

The Tor network was launched in September 2002 as ‘The Onion Routing’ network⁵ (Dingledine et al., 2004). Since the Tor browser became available in 2008, the Tor network has grown rapidly. By 2022, each day between 2.04 and 3.6 million clients (not unique persons) accessed Tor via standard relays and about 150,000 accessed Tor via bridges. The Tor network hosts an estimated 700,000 unique onion addresses/onion services⁶ (formerly hidden services). Although mostly associated with *web* services (i.e. web pages), onion services may offer SSH, BitTorrent, and SMTP/POP3 services, to name a few. Many onion services have multiple (unique) onion addresses, which direct users to the same service, so a unique onion address does not necessarily reflect a unique service.

The Tor system is an overlay network which uses ‘mix network’ routing between the website (or onion service) and user, ensuring neither knows the identity of the other. As a result, the identities and locations of the users of the network cannot be easily tracked due to the layered encryption systems used (Maras, 2014; Platzer & Lux, 2022). Originally designed by the United States Naval Research Laboratory for the purpose of protecting government communications, Tor is now ‘...used every day for a wide variety of purposes by the military, journalists, law enforcement officers, activists, and many others.’⁷ The Tor project has acknowledged the potential for criminal abuse.⁸ That said, while access to Tor for illicit products is frequent, it is not the most common use; many users access Tor to find clearnet (or open) sites that, for example, may be censored by their communications providers or prohibited by the jurisdiction in which they reside (Gehl, 2018). Jardine et al. (2020) estimated that about 6.7% of Tor users accessed the platform for illicit purposes, but note that this varies highly with the political context and location of the users.

⁵Although the project no longer uses this acronym and is just referred to as ‘Tor’ now.

⁶The Tor metrics website provides useful statistics on users and services (see: <https://metrics.torproject.org/>).

⁷See: <https://www.torproject.org/about/torusers.html>

⁸See: https://support.torproject.org/abuse/#abuse_what-about-criminals

2.1.1 Darknet Markets

Darknet markets are classified as either *omnibus* or *niche* markets. An omnibus or general market is defined as containing over 1000 product listings (or advertisements across different product categories) that are available on any given day, offered by at least several vendors. A niche or specialist market, on the other hand, is typically run by a single vendor and offers specific products. Omnibus markets are considered like a ‘main street’ or ‘high street’ market in the real world and offer a rapid assessment of the availability of illicit products and their prices. Niche markets focus on a limited set of products but may also offer ‘specialist’ products that are typically banned by omnibus markets, such as: CSAM and weapons.

Most darknet platforms require a user account to interact with the site’s services and content. Current, ‘third generation’ darknet markets, have strong ‘completely automated public Turing test to tell computers and humans apart’ (CAPTCHA) protection and limit the duration of their market’s login timeframes. Provided these logins can be refreshed, it is possible to automate the data collection process (see: *Automated techniques* below) to reduce the researcher interaction and associated time demands. This data capture process is limited by various factors and is further described in the automated techniques section below.

Collection of sales data remains a problem and often researchers need to undertake the recording of this via a time-consuming manual process. Nevertheless, evidence of actual sales transactions may be absent or scant, although when available offer further insight about markets, vendors, and product popularity. It is also apparent that some markets and vendors manipulate buyer feedback to create a favourable impression of the service provided by the vendor and/or market. This ‘gaming’ of buyer reputation or sales records and satisfaction feedback may be commonplace and can be difficult to detect.

Like onion services in general, the number of active darknet markets (or forums, see below) is unknown. Between 2010 and 2017, 103 darknet markets had been identified (Europol, 2018, p. 16), and between 2018 and 2020, an additional 43 markets have been reported (Ciphertace, 2020). However, neither of these snapshots of the darknet market ecosystem was complete because of volatility and most ceased operations within a year (Europol, 2018, p. 16). In short, the volatile and dynamic nature of the Tor platform makes sampling imprecise and generalisation about darknet markets or platforms require caution.

There are a few notable websites and services (available in either the ‘clear’ or open net and the darknet) which act as ‘dictionaries’ listing the onion addresses for current high-street omnibus and niche darknet markets (Platzer & Lux, 2022). These services typically ‘validate’ the markets which they list and help guide both novice and regular users to the relevant active Tor address. Some of these sites, such as the notorious ‘DeepDotWeb’, took commission (i.e. affiliate marketing) from sending visitors to the respective darknet markets. We may never know the exact number of active darknet markets at any one time; however, we have a good idea of the most popular markets at that time.

2.1.2 Darknet Forums

Online discussion forums have existed in one form or another since the advent of the Internet. Prior to the introduction of the world-wide-web (WWW), the Internet featured online ‘bulletin board systems’ (BBS). A user could connect to a BBS server and exchange news, information, messages, and software with other users. By the early 1990s, with the launch of the WWW (Berners-Lee, 1989), BBSs rapidly evolved into what is now known as online discussion forums.

Virtual communities are congregations of individuals in the online world (Rheingold, 1993). These community groups are often formed around shared ideological, or specific, interests. Forums may also be generally offering a range of topics and discussion formats. ‘Lurking’ among, observing, or participating in these communities enable qualitative digital ethnographic study of the group or subculture (i.e. the study of the virtual community and the respective virtual culture(s) this platform has created, through a detailed analysis of the computer-mediated social interactions).

Since the mid-2000s, deviant communities have come together on anonymous platforms, often hosted on privacy-oriented protocols (e.g. Tor). These communities discuss illegal topics, such as narcotics and drugs, cybersecurity and hacking, and child sexual abuse topics. The illicit nature of their discussion often means that these communities are ‘hidden’ and that studying their behaviours is difficult; data captured from these darknet forums provide an insight into these otherwise elusive communities. Darknet forums are also sites where the attitudes and emotions of users are observable and can be traced over time. The inherent anonymity of these forums allows less inhibited discussions.

Online discussion forums are asynchronous (i.e. not in real-time), and their structure is hierarchical in nature: an index page lists one or more subforums, each subforum contains one or more threads, and finally, each thread contains one or more posts (Holtz et al., 2012). The asynchronous nature of communication enables users to not only respond at a time which is convenient for them, but also enables them to carefully consider and construct their response. The content (i.e. messages) from these online communities is ‘relatively authentic natural data’ (Holtz et al., 2012, p. 56). Specifically, this is the community behaving in an unobscured fashion; when dialogue between users is encouraged, these forums enable the community to discuss their lifestyles, share information (i.e. experiences), and facilitate communication in less inhibited ways.

Often arranged thematically, a subforum will contain many different conversations (or ‘threads’). A thread consists of an initial message (a ‘post’) where a user starts a new discussion by asking a question, describing an experience, or requesting advice. Other forum users contribute to this thread by posting replies. Each thread contains one or more posts, a topic for discussion (a title), and a unique thread ID. Each forum post contains a message together with the post’s metadata – the forum user who authored the post, the date and time it was posted, the unique post ID, and so on.

An online discussion forum can be classified as *open*, *restricted*, or *closed*. An open forum allows users to participate and observe material without providing any registration details (in common usage, users post under the alias ‘Anonymous’). Restricted and closed forums require user registration. Registered users will ‘log-in’ to the forum, confirming their identity with a username and a password. A restricted forum allows a user to observe discussions but requires user registration to participate (i.e. create new posts) in the forum. A closed forum requires user registration to observe and participate in the discussions. Restricted and closed forums typically allow private messages (PMs) between registered users (Holtz et al., 2012).

A user hierarchy (i.e. structure) forms around online discussion forums. Accounts may be typified as: users; moderators/administrators; or owners. These latter user types have elevated privileges and may moderate content, ban users, and create new subforums (if necessary). Discussions on these forums are generally targeted and remain ‘on-topic’ due to the efforts of the administration and moderation team(s).

2.2 *Previous Research of Darknet Services*

Research on the Tor network has focused on de-anonymisation and security concerns (Saleh et al., 2018), although, more recently, there has been a focus on illicit drug markets by criminologists and drug and addiction scholars (e.g. *International Journal of Drug Policy*). The proportions of onion services that are potentially criminal have been periodically estimated and generally about a third of potential onion services cannot be classified either because they were down, empty, or locked (i.e. a login was required). One study estimated that 20% of 10,367 known Tor addresses are ‘suspicious’, 48% ‘normal’ (offering hosting and cryptocurrency services), and 32% were classified unknown (Al-Nabki et al., 2019, p. 217). Biryukov et al. (2014) estimated that of 2618 English language Tor addresses, 44% of the onion services surveyed were platforms offering illicit drugs, pornography (including possible CSAM), various counterfeit products, or weapons; however, 31% could not be identified. Moore and Rid (2016) estimated 57% (from 2723 known Tor addresses) of the active onion services they identified were illicit services.

We also attempted to describe the ‘public facing’ (i.e. web-based) Tor services in our ongoing research on the scope of services on Tor and broadly classify 25,913 onion addresses identified by our crawler on August 16, 2021. This snapshot compares with the 47,230 onion addresses (not accounting for duplicate services) indexed on the popular Tor (user-submitted and compiled) listing service ‘Fresh Onions’, although a third of its links were estimated to be inactive. Just over half of the addresses we identified were distinct services (51.5%; $n = 13,342$) and 61.3% were active ($n = 8184$). Of the active distinct services, 6.1% could not be accessed (e.g. required a login or token) and classified. Darknet markets comprised only 5.7% ($n = 463$) of the active sites, whereas unmoderated pornography (including CSAM and other illicit sexual images) accounted for 21.9% ($n = 1791$), cryptocurrency (i.e. Bitcoin and other exchanges, mixers, mining, wallet services, money

laundering) 13.7% ($n = 1119$), counterfeit products (i.e. fake currency, credit card markets, stolen data, credentials, passports, and other documents) 31.5% ($n = 2577$), malware services (e.g. hacking, DDoS, botnets, ransomware, etc.) 15.2% ($n = 1247$), and security (i.e. bullet-proof hosting and darknet market operational security) 1.7% ($n = 140$) (Broadhurst & Ball, 2021).⁹

3 Methodological Techniques for Data Collection and Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are useful in the study of darknet platforms. Analysis that describes the products listed on markets, sale volumes, prices, and quantities sold on or the content of forums may be augmented by a focus on vendors or forum posters and their diversity and cross-market or platform activity. Analysis may focus on the impact of police takedowns or sustained DDoS on market diversity, the behaviour of users and retailers (e.g. vendors), or attitudes revealed about illicit activity in forum posts. We noted above that the importance of the reliability and accuracy of the data captured depended on the efficiency and reproducibility of the data collection process, and we describe reliable and reproducible data collection methods.

The decision about what data to capture has implications for the data analysis phase as insights can be skewed based on the available data. We endeavour here to capture the entirety of a darknet market and describe all the available variables that can be identified such as: product descriptions, including quantities and prices; vendor information, including handles; PGP keys; shipping methods; and buyer feedback where available. Forums can also be crawled and offer a substantial corpus of text data that may reflect attitudes, emotions, grievances, illicit desires, and so on of the users and virtual community the forum represents.

3.1 Automated Techniques

Data capture from websites is made easier when utilising automated ‘crawler’ and ‘scraper’ technologies. A ‘crawler’ is an automated script designed to search an entire website in a methodical manner and find as many unique pages as possible. This crawling process creates a static copy of the websites for later analysis. Copying the website in such a manner produces a timestamp for the time of capture, as well as retaining the structure of the page, allowing users to navigate the static site as if browsing in real time (Dolliver & Kenney, 2016). This is particularly important in

⁹A small number (201; 2.46%) of non-English onion services were identified and 1.76% ($n = 144$) of onion sites comprised services not included elsewhere.

the case of volatile darknet markets. This method additionally creates historical records for later use. A ‘scraper’ implements a technique for extracting (i.e. ‘scraping’) data from hypertext markup (HTML) pages. This data is exported to a database for later analysis (e.g. a ‘comma separated value’ [CSV] file provides a ‘flat database’). The database can then be used with different statistical programs (e.g. STATA, SPSS) to import and use the data.

3.1.1 Crawlers

Internet (or web) crawling has a long history (see: Mirtaheri et al., 2014). Arguably the first web crawler was implemented by Repository-Based Software Engineering the ‘RBSE spider’ in 1994 and rapidly became a widely used tool (Eichmann, 1994). The best-known Internet crawler was described by Brin and Page (1998) and implemented as the Google search engine. While crawling the clearnet is no longer a challenge, there are difficulties that arise in the context of crawling onion services and darknet markets or forums. Additionally, the intention of the crawler is also different. Most crawlers are designed to map out a domain of (unknown) sites. However, crawlers for darknet markets or forums typically identify only the domain to be crawled. The necessary components of a web crawler are (Alkhatib & Basheer, 2019a, p. 56): (1) The crawling space (i.e. the domain of information to be retrieved); (2) The processing of the website (i.e. the registration, login validation, and exporting of session cookies); and (3) The storage and analysis (i.e. processing) of static HTML pages.

Numerous studies have explored darknet platforms and focused on the products advertised (especially illicit drugs) and the ways in which sellers, market operators, and users interact through these onion services (Christin, 2012; Décary-Héту & Aldridge, 2015; Soska & Christin, 2015; Aldridge & Décary-Héту, 2016; Bancroft & Scott Reid, 2016; Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Van Buskirk et al., 2016a, b). In earlier studies, data collection was not automated, but was copied manually from web listings, thus limiting the scale and frequency of data captured. Christin (2012; see also Soska & Christin, 2015) provided a thorough description of a simple method used to automatically collect data from Silk Road 1.0 by adapting a website copier ‘HTTrack’ (run through the ‘torify’ command) and exploiting the authentication cookies on Silk Road 1.0 to avoid CAPTCHA measures without the need to constantly provide a fresh login.¹⁰

The general challenges of crawling are scalability, management (i.e. login and cookie management), and obligations to avoid harm. The domain of websites to crawl is massive and accounting for this scope requires a crafted solution; additionally, when running a crawler, one must be cautious not to cause a DDoS attack against the website (Alkhatib & Basheer, 2019a, p. 56). Furthermore, there are unique challenges of crawling onion services. Onion services are typically volatile;

¹⁰HTTrack: <http://www.httrack.com> available since 1998 and cited in Christin (2012, p. 215).

there are accessibility concerns with CAPTCHA and automating the login/cookie retrieval process; and the operational security capability of the administrators who run these onion services (Alkhatib & Basheer, 2019a, p. 56). These problems are exacerbated in the context of darknet markets.

Daily collection or census ‘snapshots’ of darknet activity may be preferred but is less common than weekly or monthly data sweeps of known darknet markets. However, other than pragmatic reasons (i.e. time and cost), the rationale for different timeframes is unclear. Soska and Christin (2015) suggest that data capture should be complete, instantaneous, and frequent, but note several difficulties such as avoiding censorship, the variable time span different markets need to be fully or completely crawled (over hours to days), and the unpredictable availability of some darknet markets. More generally, problems can include the impact of law enforcement activity (e.g. takedowns or other disruption), DDoS attacks from competitors or other actors, and exit scams. Each of these events can have an impact upon data collection or even derail research, especially those that seek to describe trends. Service disruption is common and can lead to a sustained period of inaccessibility, or the end-of-life for the service. Consideration must be given for what period of inactivity represents an end-of-life – we arbitrarily determined that 2 weeks without activity represent end-of-life. From that moment on, the service is terminated, and we maintain the historical data for comparison purposes. It can be useful to find topical discussion about these ceased services on darknet forums. These discussions often explain the inactivity in detail (i.e. was it due to law enforcement takedown, a DDoS disruption, an exit-scam, or voluntary closure). Darknet crawlers, such as ‘Datacrypto’ described by Décary-Héту and Aldridge (2013, 2015), may be available upon request. An early version of a crawler and scraper tool was described by Gwern Branwen (2019), who also provided the data obtained on several onion services between 2013 and 2015. Celestini et al. (2016) and Soska and Christin (2015) describe their methods in detail, but other studies do not always describe in sufficient detail the methods used, or problems encountered. Alkhatib and Basheer’s (2019b) implementation (‘Darky’) does solve CAPTCHAs and automates the login step (where available), but does not download entire pages – the crawler simply downloads and processes the relevant data. However, ‘Darky’ was applied to a single (unnamed) market and included techniques for scraping.

This crawler and scraper implementation allows the extraction of information relevant to both products and vendors. The kind of information extracted includes: (1) products (e.g. title, vendor, country of origin, country of destination, price (often in USD), product views, product sales, product date (i.e. when it was put up as a listing), and product category); and (2) vendors (e.g. name/alias, level, trust, positive feedback, join date, and number of sales). In practice, not all markets feature the same elements, and specific designs may not easily generalise across markets.

Typically, an automated web-crawler will have a simplified user agent string to identify it and allow communication between a site that has been crawled and the users of the web-crawler. This user agent string changes with every other release of the Tor browser package and must be updated in the crawler accordingly. By convention, an automated crawler will feature the string ‘bot’, identifying it as an

automated bot.¹¹ An automated web crawler also abides with the rules known as the ‘Robots Exclusion Standard’ outlined in the markets’ robots.txt file (if the market contains such a file). As this file is necessarily public knowledge, if a market does not contain a robots.txt file, the assumption is that those markets allow unrestricted crawling of their websites.

Researchers at the University of New South Wales National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) have developed an automated crawler to capture relevant and monitor trends (Mathur et al., 2020). This focuses on a subset of products; in particular, ‘illicit drugs (e.g. heroin), key licit drugs (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes), and pharmaceutical medicines, as well as drug-related paraphernalia (e.g. needles and syringes, reagent test kits)’ (Mathur et al., 2020, p. 1). This method includes an unsupervised artificial intelligence (AI) model for product classification (according to the Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical classification system devised by the World Health Organisation) and solves the onion service CAPTCHA automatically (i.e. robot exclusion), while offering researchers the capability of observing trends in real time. Such enhancements demonstrate the feasibility of monitoring darknet platforms at scale. NDARC hosts an interactive dashboard which features and discusses their findings.¹²

3.1.2 Scrapers

The previously defined crawlers have a corresponding scraper to collect the information from the captured hypertext markup (HTML) files and export the information to a human readable format (e.g. CSV format). Once the data are exported to the database format, a ‘data-cleaning’ process is undertaken to remove superfluous material and standardise text and other data values before the analysis phase.

Although scrapers are often implemented ad-hoc, depending on the darknet market or forum, a subset of common features routinely appear, which can be recorded in the corresponding database. At a minimum, each record ought to include the: product name, vendor name, price in BTC,¹³ price in \$CURRENCY (calculated from the value of BTC at the time of capture), product URL, and vendor URL. Other information such as quantity sold or a vendor’s feedback ranking can sometimes be present on specific markets and scrapers can be adjusted accordingly to include these data. Due to the non-standardised formats in darknet market design, data from multiple markets may feature incomplete or missing values (for instance, a data field from one market is absent in another). These missing values should be included in the data analysis process.

¹¹ The user agent string should provide not only the bot’s name (identifying it as a bot/web-crawler), but also contact details (an email).

¹² See: <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource-analytics/trends-availability-and-types-drugs-sold-internet-cryptomarkets-october-2021>

¹³ Bitcoin is no longer the cryptocurrency of choice among darknet markets due to the ability to trace Bitcoin transactions.

3.2 *Quantitative Techniques*

Darknet markets provide researchers with quantitative data that can be used to observe trends in products, prices of illicit drugs, and other contraband. Most research into darknet markets has featured quantitative modelling techniques (including our own; see reference list). In our experience, this is a rich source of information about the *supply* side of the illicit darknet trade (i.e. product availability). However, without a qualitative perspective, this information may lack context about product trends or demands and what products are actually sold or transacted in the darknet trade system.

3.3 *Qualitative Techniques*

Qualitative research has been undertaken on darknet markets, with a particular emphasis on the forums and the information centres that focus on onion services (Kamphausen & Werse, 2019). The most common qualitative data sources include comments and user ratings (Aldridge & Décary-Héту, 2016), total numbers and categories of listings (Van Buskirk et al., 2016b), and a combination of these, considering listings and estimates of transactions on a particular market or several markets (Aldridge & Décary-Héту, 2016). This analysis provides useful insight about profitability, availability, and the extent of repeat business for a particular market(s) and/or products. Although samples are usually small (and potentially unrepresentative), interviews with or surveys of darknet users (as well as vendors and market operators) can also provide insights as well as potential verification of activities, logistics, and the role of trust (Bancroft & Scott Reid, 2016; Barratt et al., 2014; Kamphausen & Werse, 2019; Martin et al., 2020).

Discussions about darknet markets frequently occur on market-related forums (or, in certain cases, related to the whole ecosystem). Topics discussed often focus on a market or vendors' reliability, market closures, law enforcement countermeasures, and product purity or value, among others. These platforms provide a rich source of qualitative textual material (amenable to some forms of discourse and narrative analysis) which can be used to help predict trends in products and vendor activities for specific darknet markets.

Examining the content of forums allows an approximate validation (or proto triangulation) of quantitative data acquired by a crawler. Distilling the often-vast text corpus of forums into content themes, poster or participant activities, and priorities is time consuming. We proceed by creating a coding template after close reading of the text using a narrative analysis framework attending to the functions and substance of the text narrative. Dialogic and structural elements in the text corpus are also present but vary with the format of forums and the researchers' inductive reflections are decisive as to relevance (see e.g. Mishler, 1995; Parcell & Baker, 2018; Holtz et al., 2012). Market-oriented forums tend to be instrumental, but

performative elements may also be present and can be central to forums that focus on moral or ideological content.

Coding data is a method for systematically categorising (i.e. labelling, organising) data to extract themes and patterns. While technological solutions do exist to extract patterns in the data (e.g. word clouds, word frequencies), manual coding is still required. The grounded, or inductive, approach to coding suggests that the researcher should start with their data to explore content or thematic analysis. When the researcher finds an element of data they wish to categorise, they create a new code and document the data as such. By the end of the analysis process, the researcher has created a coding scheme.

Technological tools, such as natural language processing (NLP) techniques, face difficulty with the ‘informal language’ commonly used in computer-mediated communications (CMC). Netspeak (e.g. emoticons and abbreviations), accent, non-fluencies, and filler words are challenges for NLP algorithms. NLP techniques such as topic modelling can be used to reduce large corpora to a set of common or repeated ‘abstract topics’. However, the number of topics is coded manually.

4 Ethical and Emotional Issues Related to Darknet Research

This methodology for collecting data from darknet markets requires that ethical consideration of the implications and risks for darknet users, sellers, and others (including researchers) is merited (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Martin & Christin, 2016). Darknet forums present further difficulties for researchers; gaining consent of participants and maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants are paramount for the integrity of research. Researchers engaging in participant observation approaches with deviant subcultures on forums, especially anonymous forums, face the risk of being exposed to abhorrent content (see below for an example). The ethical issues associated with web scraping are briefly noted here; however, a broader discussion is offered by Martin and Christin (2016) and Brewer et al. (2021).

Given that potentially identifying data is not available to researchers of darknet platforms, the risk of legal harm to subjects observed is minimal; however, a full ethical review is recommended given incidental risks to researchers such as exposure to CSAM. This process can be laborious and time-consuming for the researcher(s). However, it is crucial considering the potential risk of exposure and the need to comply with laws regarding the mandatory reporting of CSAM. Collecting data from CSAM media sharing platforms requires special ethical approval due to the risk of moral injury to researchers exposed to abhorrent materials (e.g. sexual violence, torture, lethal violence). Even in the absence of visual media (e.g. videos and images), these communities share fictional and non-fictional stories of their desires and behaviours. This exposure can be quite confronting to even the most

seasoned researcher. For example, there are CSAM media-sharing communities hosted as darknet services. While these services trade in media (e.g. images, videos, stories), they also feature community discussion on the topic. Access to these communities may be blocked by a CAPTCHA which itself features CSAM; thus, any researcher(s) willing to engage with this material should be aware they will likely encounter this material, despite using image obfuscation. This highlights the importance of a support network for the researcher(s) as well as institutional ethical guidance and approval for such research. Our ethical protocol includes psychological support (a 'de-briefing' process), and if encountered, specific arrangements to enable safe and secure referral of abhorrent images to law enforcement.

Investigators must inform participants of their involvement in research, as their willingness to participate may depend on whether they know they are involved. In the context of a darknet forum, providing this information to participants is difficult. Open forums (where registration and login credentials are required) can be viewed as being in the public domain. This removes the requirement that the researcher obtain an informed consent before collecting data. In this way, individual contributions (i.e. the 'posts') can be viewed in a similar manner to individual naturalistic observations in a public space. This mitigates issues around participant agreement on open forums. The data 'captured' is the public record of the onion service contents at a particular time and protocols for human research subjects are not required. However, obtaining data from a closed forum without prior consent could be unethical and researchers should seek ethical approval for covert observation when this is necessary. In our research, we have not investigated closed forums. Obtaining consent from participants in a closed forum context is difficult (e.g. not all original users are likely to be present, yet their data will still be available).

Maintaining the three fundamentals of participatory research, namely, anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy, is important for methodological reasons. Researchers of darknet forums achieve this by (1) *Anonymity*: rebranding the users' alias (i.e. given a pseudonym in the write-up). This would ensure that no link can be established between specific responses and a specific forum user. (2) *Confidentiality*: as above with anonymity a forum users' identity and IP address is unavailable and unattributable in the Tor network; and (3) *Privacy*: data can be 'scrubbed' before being recorded (e.g. usernames, etc.), this ensures that anonymity is maintained. Literal (or direct) quotes attributable to a specific user are avoided in publication.

Christin (2012) also raised ethical concerns such as whether CAPTCHA bypass or 'workarounds' are 'hacks' and prevent platform operators from becoming aware of the crawl by re-pooling the Tor relay if regularly accessed over time. Christin reported the Silk Road 1.0 platform administrators did not contact him: either because they did not detect the crawl (nor was the possibility discussed in the relevant forums) or if they did so they did not regard it as a problem. Our approach was to include a user-agent string, a means of enabling a website to identify the device (and users) accessing that website and like Christin no market administrators contacted us.

5 Conclusion

Darknet platforms are volatile and can experience significant or prolonged downtime due to load on Tor relays and bridges. Soska and Christin (2015), among others, note the ubiquitous connection failures typical of data collection on Tor. The absence of extensive cataloguing or indexing of darknet markets and other onion services prevents accurate sampling and inhibits generalisation about all markets or forums. Additional periodic reconnaissance and qualitative investigation are required to address representativeness and validity. We have found frequent attention to the content of relevant forums helpful in guiding research questions and identifying new and emerging markets and contraband products. Darknet platforms may be unavailable due to DDoS attacks (Cimpanu, 2019), exit scams (Greenberg, 2015), voluntary closures (Power, 2019), and occasionally hacks or de-anonymisation or seizure by law enforcement (Van Buskirk et al., 2016a, b; Europol, 2018). This often cannot be predicted ahead of time and can cause data collection processes to experience significant delays or fail altogether.

For general data capture on darknet services, there has been growing concern for the ‘human’ aspect as researchers are required to interact with illicit items. The scale of data from these onion services has increased significantly as the popularity of these darknet markets increases, resulting in a requirement for automation and classification methods for data analysis. While many classification models exist, specialised classifiers have become important due to the absence of a complete taxonomy capable of recording such data (Dalins et al., 2018b). Adding to this, illegal information such as CSAM can be prevalent on onion services and the use of automated classification methods could significantly reduce the number of images viewed by individuals who classify and investigate CSAM (Dalins et al., 2018a) and thus minimise moral injury. Regarding other illicit services available on Tor, it is also usual to program crawlers to avoid image capture where the risk of CSAM capture is likely and to inspect text with images obscured. However, in jurisdictions such as Australia, the collection (i.e. possession) of textual descriptions of CSAM may be unlawful and additional ethical and reporting arrangements are necessary to ensure the research is both lawful and ethical.

Researchers operating in this environment need to be aware of the risks associated with investigating onion services. These risks can potentially limit the kind of research which can be undertaken, but simultaneously highlight just how important it is to perform this kind of research.

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Chapter 29

Conducting Psychosocial Research with Victims of Sexting and Online Sexual Victimization in Spain



Aina M. Gassó  and Esperanza L. Gómez-Durán 

1 Definition of the Phenomenon

Even though the exchange of sexual messages has existed throughout history, new technologies have facilitated the exchange of images and videos, which are undoubtedly more explicit and might have a stronger impact on senders and receivers of the sexual content (Agustina, 2010). This exchange of erotic or sexual content has become to be known as sexting, a term first used in 2005 by the Sunday Telegraph, which unified the terms “sex” and “texting” and tried to describe a new and incipient phenomenon where people were exchanging text messages with erotic or sexual content. In 2009, the term sexting was included in the English dictionary as an official word (Gaylord, 2011). The term sexting has evolved over the years. However, up to date there is still no clear consensus around its definition (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017); this means different conceptualizations of the phenomenon are used when carrying out studies on sexting, which makes it difficult for the academic community to compare results and obtain homogeneous data (Agustina & Gómez-Durán, 2012).

This is one of the many challenges that researchers face when conducting studies on sexting, which is what we will try to explore and explain throughout this chapter. First, we will revise some of the most frequently used definitions of the term in order to introduce the reader to the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, we will explore how we landed on sexting research and explain the main struggles we faced in sexting research design, including the conceptualization of the term, designing the questionnaire, and data collection. Finally, we will reflect on the lessons learned so far.

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As sexting was getting an increased media attention, numerous scientific investigations were carried out to try to understand this new phenomenon. Incipient research used a more restrictive conceptualization of the phenomenon, defining sexting as the sending of text messages with erotic or sexual content (Martín-Pozuelo, 2015; OSI, 2011); however, due to the massive use of smartphones and new technological devices, most researchers have included the sending of sexually suggestive pictures and/or videos as part of the definition of the term (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). In this line, Ferguson (2011) defined sexting as the “sending of explicit photographs or messages to others,” Kowalski et al. (2007) defined it as exclusively sending sexually explicit or nude photographs, and Strassberg et al. (2014) defined it as “the transfer of sexually explicit photos via cell phone.”. However, these definitions remained very restrictive, and thus, derived in a poor conceptualization of the term sexting.

More recent research started to use broader definitions of sexting to conceptualize the phenomenon, including a broader repertoire of actions, such as the sending, receiving, and forwarding sexually explicit photos or videos. Mitchell et al. (2012) in a national study with 1560 US minors defined sexting as creating, receiving, or forwarding nude or semi-nude images, and accordingly, many authors included in their definitions sending, receiving, and any type of electronic transference of sexually explicit or suggestive pictures, videos and/or text messages, but exclusively using mobile phones or technological devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Wysocki & Childers, 2011; Hudson & Fetro, 2015; Morelli et al., 2016; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017). Reyns et al. (2011) defined sexting as “the sending of sexually explicit messages or pictures to someone else, mainly through mobile phones but also via email, instant messaging or other technological means.”

Furthermore, some authors consider that sexting is a voluntary behaviour by definition and define the phenomenon as “the creation and voluntary delivery of texts, photos or videos with a sexual or erotic content, through the internet or mobile devices,” considering that any sexting behaviour associated with coercion or victimization should be categorized as a separate behaviour (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015); while other researchers consider that coercive and victimizing behaviours related to sexting are part of the phenomenon (Englander, 2012; Drouin et al., 2015). In this sense, Englander defined sexting as “taking nude pictures of oneself,” but when measuring the phenomenon, she differentiated between pressured-sexters and non-pressured-sexters. Similarly, Drouin et al. (2015) defined sexting as the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone but indicated that coercion can be a part of the sexting behaviour dynamic (Drouin et al., 2015).

In the same line, there have also been different categorizations of the phenomenon. According to Wolak and Finkelhor (2011)’s typology, sexting behaviours among teens can be divided into two broad categories: aggravated sexting and experimental sexting. Aggravated sexting behaviours encompass all types of sexting that may involve criminal or abusive elements beyond the creation, sending, or possession of youth-produced sexual content, including (i) adult involvement or (ii) criminal or abusive behaviour by minors. On the other hand, experimental sexting behaviours comprise those instances that do not include abuse or coercion, whereby

teens voluntarily took pictures of themselves to create flirting or romantic interest in others. Another categorization of sexting divides it into active sexting and passive sexting. Active sexting would refer to the creation and distribution of self-produced sexual content, while passive sexting would refer to receiving sexual content produced by others (Agustina et al., 2020). However, it is frequent to find an engagement in reciprocal sexting, meaning that those who create and send sexual content often receive it from others as well (Agustina et al., 2020).

Another issue when trying to define sexting has to do with the sexter's age. Some authors such as McLaughlin (2010) and Agustina (2010) use a definition of sexting which only contemplates the involvement of teens. In her study, McLaughlin (2010) refers to sexting as "the practice among teens of taking nude or partially nude digital images of themselves or others and texting them to other teens, emailing them to other teens or posting them on web sites such as [Myspace.com](https://www.myspace.com) or [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)." Similarly, Lenhart (2009) had defined sexting as "the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images by minor teens." However, most authors consider sexting to be a behaviour in which both teens and adults engage, being that sexting has been seen to increase with age (Klettke et al., 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015), which also is an aspect we will further explore throughout the chapter.

Despite the debate on whether sexting is a normal form of sexual expression or a risky behaviour that needs to be prevented, most authors agree that engaging in sexting behaviours can entail future risks, and that it can be considered a threshold for other forms of online and offline victimization, especially for minors and teenagers (Agustina, 2012; Reyns et al., 2011). Sexting has been associated with multiple negative consequences, both legal and psychological. Regardless of the self-produced sexual content's origin (voluntary – experimental sexting or coerced – aggravated sexting), sending oneself sexual pictures and/or videos implies a risk for the sender. Once the sender shares the sexual photos or videos, the images can be used by the receiver as a way to online sexually victimize the sender. In that sense, the receiver can then distribute the sexual content without the person's consent, threaten the person to distribute them in exchange for money or economic retribution, or threaten them in exchange for more sexual content. Engaging in sexting behaviours can become a threshold for other forms of online sexual victimization, such as sexting coercion, the non-consensual dissemination of sexual content, revenge porn, and sextortion, and in minors, it can relate to becoming a victim of online grooming (Agustina et al., 2020).

Following that line of thought, and taking into account new research that was coming up, we started to understand sexting and online sexual victimization as different behaviours of the same spectrum, which is why we started to include online sexual victimization in our sexting research projects. Again, although there is a lack of consensus around its definition, online sexual victimization has been defined by some authors as "the experience of some of type of pressure through the Internet or mobile phones to obtain unwanted sexual contact or information (e.g. share sexual information, send images with sexual content, or do something against the victim's wishes) or/and the distribution or dissemination by the perpetrator of sexual images

or sexual information of the victim against his/her will” (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015). This phenomenon has also been defined by other authors under the name of IBSA (Image-based sexual abuse) as taking, distributing, and/or making of threats to distribute a nude or sexual image without a person’s consent, or as technology facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017; Henry & Powell, 2018; Henry et al., 2019).

As can be observed, the conceptualization of these phenomena is one of the difficulties that sexting researchers face when designing and conducting psychosocial research in this field. The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with useful insights on how we conducted research with sexting victims, what challenges we faced, and how we tried to solve them.

2 Phases of Fieldwork

2.1 Landing on Sexting and Online Sexual Victimization Research

As previously mentioned, the term “sexting” was first introduced in 2005, coinciding with the emergence of the first sexting studies (Agustina & Gómez-Durán, 2012). By approximately 2010, interest in sexting research had heightened, as media outlets began to report on some of the initial cases. This prompted our research team to consider the development of a study aimed at measuring the prevalence of sexting and other associated variables among university students. In 2012, Dr. Agustina and, I, Dr. Esperanza Luisa Gómez-Durán (hereafter referred to as ELGD) published our seminal paper on sexting, outlining research criteria for this globally recognized social phenomenon, which involves the exchange of sexual content. This publication resulted from my first exposure to sexting research (ELGD), and the project was spearheaded and designed by Dr. Agustina, a Criminal Law scholar and professor at the School of Law of the *Universitat Internacional de Catalunya*. Although sexting was not initially within my area of research interest, Dr. Agustina’s deep concern about this phenomenon motivated me to join his project. He is now acknowledged as a trailblazer in this field. This experience taught me a valuable lesson: one should heed the warnings of those who anticipate future issues in emerging phenomena. Indeed, as Dr. Agustina had anticipated, sexting has since experienced a remarkable increase in prevalence, particularly over the past decade.

At the time of our initial survey of college students, sexting had garnered increased media attention, leading to numerous scientific investigations aimed at understanding this new phenomenon. My background (ELGD) is in the field of Health Sciences, and thus, the second lesson I learned in this field relates to the challenges of conceptualizing phenomena in social science research. As previously mentioned, early research on sexting employed a more restrictive conceptualization

of the phenomenon, while more recent investigations have adopted broader definitions, encompassing a wider range of actions such as sending, receiving, and forwarding sexually explicit photos or videos.

In addition, as with the concept of normality in medical literature, there is no universal definition of sexting. The integration of technology into our private lives has become commonplace, but this was not anticipated when research on the phenomenon began. Our research team dedicated extensive efforts to properly approach and define the phenomenon. While our diverse backgrounds and disciplines as researchers (my medical background and Professor Agustina's Criminal Law background) sometimes led to disagreements, we ultimately reached a consensus, enriching our research through complementary perspectives. Accurately defining the phenomenon was crucial for differentiating and positioning our research group, which some would argue is akin to establishing a brand and a strategy that must be defined a priori.

In regard to my own experience, I, Dr. Aina M. Gassó Moser (hereafter referred to as AGM), was first introduced to sexting research in 2017, when Prof. Agustina, the director of the master's program I had just completed, invited me to participate in conducting research on sexting. Although the research team was not yet clearly defined, I viewed this as a valuable opportunity to collaborate on research and to begin pursuing my PhD in the near future. The first step in the process was to review the existing literature in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research on sexting. As we previously noted, the complexity of defining and conceptualizing the phenomenon was readily apparent, and we observed a lack of research in Spain on the association between sexting, online sexual victimization, and psychopathology. Consequently, we decided to develop a research project that would ultimately serve as the foundation for my PhD.

In the same vein as the previous paragraphs, sexting research necessitates a rapid and dynamic adaptation to evolving terminology. Researchers must remain open to new vocabulary emerging from the internet, as well as proactively participate in refining terminology to enhance its alignment with the reality of the phenomenon. In terms of both terminology and conceptualization, which are critical for its measurement, passivity is not an option. Additionally, there is a unique risk in this field that popular usage inaccuracies could lead to confusion. Sexting research has taught us this, and we are committed to actively engaging with complex issues whenever potentially ambiguous terms are encountered online (Gómez-Durán & Martín-Fumadó, 2022).

2.2 Facing the Abyss of the Sample

Prior to commencing data collection, our research team had to consider which population we wished to target and which sample would provide access to that group. Initially, we intended to focus our research on teenagers, given the lack of existing research in this field involving this age group. However, gaining access to minors in

Spain was a highly arduous and challenging task, due to bureaucratic procedures and the need for parental consent, particularly when minors were under 16 years of age.

Our first experience in the adolescence field was discouraging. In order to obtain a representative sample of approximately 400 minors from Catalonia, we had to first calculate the number of teenagers we required, then randomly select schools from each province –administratively, Spain is divided into 50 provinces and 2 autonomous cities (Ceuta and Melilla) – to avoid any potential data biases. We then had to locate the school principals' contact information online and initiate contact through email or phone, explain the research project, and request their cooperation. However, in most cases, schools did not respond to our initial contact or failed to respond to our subsequent emails or participation agreements. This initial challenge highlights the difficulties researchers face when attempting to conduct research with teenagers in Spain, especially when it comes to sexting and sexual behaviour research.

Currently, our research team is conducting a new study on teenage pornography consumption in Spain, and we have been granted access to an adolescent sample due to direct involvement of a public association responsible for delivering sexual education prevention talks. Despite this connection, we are still encountering difficulties in obtaining cooperation from schools. Initially, we planned to obtain data from 25 schools, but we have only managed to gain access to 8 of them since some schools are reluctant to participate in studies regarding teenagers' sexual behaviours. Our experience was that schools which received the final questionnaire intended for distribution among their students exhibited greater openness towards discussing the study's data collection procedures and were more likely to inform parents about the study's significance. Conversely, schools that did not receive the questionnaire and were, therefore, unaware of the questions being asked declined to participate in the study. Our perception was that schools wanted to exercise some degree of control over the questionnaire's content to ensure that it did not violate ethical boundaries. Therefore, we suggest that researchers strive to foster transparency while attempting to access complex samples.

In addition to sample's access concerns, conducting sexual research with teenagers in Spain presents significant challenges, including obtaining parental consent prior to data collection. According to Pereda et al. (2019), ethical guidelines for sexual and victimological research with teenagers and minors under the age of 16 require parental or legal guardian consent in addition to their own consent. Obtaining parental consent is a time-consuming process that can significantly reduce participation rates and requires the collection of personal information such as name and identification number to differentiate between eligible and ineligible participants. For example, our ongoing pornography research project has yielded approximately 95% participation rates among teenagers aged 16 and above, but only around 40% participation among those aged 14–16 years.

Given these challenges, in our studies on sexting we ultimately decided to shift our research focus to young adults aged 18–25 years. This decision was supported by a review of existing research, which indicated that sexting was most commonly

practiced in this demographic. As such, we selected university students as our study population, which afforded us easy access and could provide direct consent.

After defining our target population for the research, we had to consider whether we wanted to limit the study to Catalonia, where our university is located, or expand it to a national sample, despite the added effort required. We ultimately opted for a national sample, recognizing that it would provide more comprehensive and nuanced data.

The next question was how we could access the sample. Due to environmental constraints such as limited funding, and the fact that one of the researchers (AGM) had limited prior experience in sexting research, we employed simple and cost-effective research techniques that taught us that sophisticated tools are not always necessary for conducting research.

Despite our initial assumption that recruiting an adult sample would be easier than recruiting teenagers, we found it to be a challenging task. Initially, we contacted different university professors in our network, requesting access to their students for offline questionnaire administration. However, this process was cumbersome and time-consuming and yielded a limited number of participants. We ultimately expanded our efforts to reach out to professors nationwide and requested that they distribute an online questionnaire to their students. In total, we obtained data from around 3000 students, with approximately 1000 responding to the offline questionnaire and 2000 responding online. Surprisingly, the offline questionnaire yielded a significantly higher completion rate, with 95.5% of completed questionnaires, compared to only 46% in the online group. Our experience highlights the value of offline data collection, despite its laborious, costly, and time-consuming nature, in terms of ensuring high participation rates.

2.3 Navigating Data Collection

Upon defining our sample and gaining access to it, the next step was to determine the data collection process. We had to decide which online survey platform to use, obtain Ethics Committee approval, and establish the procedures for data management. The first obstacle we encountered was selecting an appropriate online survey platform. It was a challenging task due to the vast number of available options, each with its own associated costs. As our university did not have a comprehensive license for any specific software, and we had no external funding for the project, we were obliged to bear all expenses out of our own pockets. This situation is quite common among Spanish researchers, particularly those without funding or those who do not have an employment contract with the university (i.e. external PhD candidates). Even for those with research funding, the allocated budgets can be insufficient, rendering research expenses a significant challenge. Once the survey platform was selected, we had to transfer our survey questions to the online platform and initiate the survey distribution and data collection processes.

Various methods are employed in sexting research, including surveys, interviews, and content analysis of *sext* messages. Most sexting studies use online surveys or questionnaires to gather information about sexting behaviours, attitudes, and motivations (Walrave et al., 2014; Barrense-Dias & Berchtold, 2020). Interviews can also be used to explore more in-depth aspects of sexting behaviour, such as the role of gender or the impact of sexting on relationships. Finally, content analysis of *sext* messages can be used to examine the nature of the content, such as the type of messages being sent or the frequency of different types of sexting behaviour. For instance, Klettke et al.'s study (2014) employed content analysis to analyse the types of messages sent in sexting between romantic partners.

Furthermore, data collection processes in sexting research require careful consideration of ethical issues and the unique challenges associated with studying a sensitive topic. Researchers must take care to ensure that the privacy and confidentiality of participants are protected, and that they do not cause harm or discomfort to participants in the course of data collection. Overall, data collection processes in sexting research require careful planning, consideration of ethical issues, and appropriate methods to ensure that the resulting data are valid and reliable. Frequently, anonymity serves as a means to protect participants; however, this can hinder follow-up or linked study designs.

Regarding the data collection process, it should be taken into account that sexting research implies asking questions regarding sexual behaviours and about victimization and perpetration behaviours that can even be felonies. Thus, researchers that conduct investigations on these topics should carefully review the applicable legal framework and design their project accordingly. When conducting research on sensitive topics such as sexting, researchers must be aware of the potential for biased or dishonest responses from participants due to the personal nature of the questions being asked, which may include inquiries into criminal behaviours related to victimization or perpetration. In particular, the risk of participants providing inaccurate information may be greater for those completing surveys offline due to concerns about others potentially accessing their answers. To mitigate this challenge, researchers must carefully consider the wording of their questions (this issue will be further discussed in subsequent sections) and offer support resources to participants who may need to report traumatic experiences or feelings of distress.

2.4 Avoiding Bias in Results Interpretation

Personally (AGM), the most challenging stages of my research project were data analysis and research design. Despite spending a year on this endeavour, I struggled to make progress. However, I was fortunate to have been accepted as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, where I had the opportunity to work with Professor Dr. Katrin Mueller-Johnson, an esteemed statistics professor at the Institute of Criminology. Over the course of a month, she provided me with invaluable

guidance and taught me all that I could absorb. Without her expertise, I doubt I could have finished my PhD or made sense of the statistical analyses.

From my experience, I would strongly advise individuals interested in research to have a strong foundation in methodology and statistics and to consider becoming visiting scholars. My time at Cambridge was one of the most rewarding academic and personal experiences I have ever had. Under Dr. Mueller-Johnson's tutelage, I gained a better understanding of data analysis, which helped me to navigate this challenging process. While being part of a large, structured research group with access to resources and statistical experts can be helpful, having a solid personal background in these areas is still essential to ensure accurate interpretation of results and avoid any biases. In hindsight, I think I would have enjoyed the research journey more if I had been better equipped in this area.

Interpreting the results of one's research is yet another challenge that researchers face. It is critical to have a supportive and structured research group or supervisory team during this phase as brainstorming and sharing ideas and viewpoints can be instrumental in understanding the results obtained. It is not possible for one person to be an expert on every topic, so incorporating the opinions and expertise of others, particularly from different disciplines, can offer a broader perspective of the reality that the results represent.

Despite being an exciting and thrilling phase of research, results interpretation can also be terrifying, as unexpected or negative results may contradict one's hypotheses. The real problem, however, is not the disappointment of results that deny associations or relationships between variables, as this information is still valuable to the scientific community. The real issue lies in the publication of negative results. As publications are essential for PhD projects, young researchers feel pressured to publish as much as possible, leading to anxiety, confusion, and fear when the expected results are not obtained. The current system of measuring research capacity only through publication rates needs to be re-evaluated. If other variables were considered, it could encourage researchers to publish useful information, leading to a favourable outcome for science.

3 Techniques Employed

When addressing sexting in scientific research, it is important to approach the topic with sensitivity and respect. Sexting is a sensitive issue and can be associated with risks, such as privacy violations and potential legal consequences. Therefore, it is important to ensure that ethical considerations are in place to protect the privacy and well-being of research participants. Researchers should clearly define the terminology used to discuss sexting, as different definitions can be found in the literature. It is also important to ensure that the data collected is representative and that the sample is diverse and inclusive to avoid biased or stigmatizing conclusions.

Additionally, researchers should consider the potential impact of their findings and ensure that they are communicated in a responsible and accurate manner. This includes considering the potential implications of their research for the general public, policymakers, and the participants themselves. Finally, it is important to be mindful of the potential stigmatization and criminalization of sexting, particularly when working with young people. Researchers should avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes and instead aim to provide a nuanced and balanced understanding of the phenomenon.

3.1 The Construction of the Questionnaire

As previously discussed, research on sexting presents several challenges, with conceptualization being one of the most significant. Accurate conceptualization is crucial when developing a research questionnaire, as the operationalization of variables can significantly impact research outcomes. To address this issue, we conducted a literature review to gain an understanding of the current state of sexting research, including different definitions of the term and the various instruments used to measure it. Our review revealed that authors used different questionnaires to measure sexting depending on their conceptualization of the behaviour. To ensure consistency in our research, we developed our definition of sexting based on different variables, including both voluntary and coercive actions, the practice of the behaviour among both teenagers and adults, and the sending, forwarding, and/or receiving of audiovisual sexual content, but not text messages. We made this last distinction based on the association between sexting, online sexual victimization, and mental health, as we found that audiovisual sexual material had a different impact on mental health compared to sexual text messages.

With a clear definition of sexting established, we searched for a validated questionnaire that measured the concept as we had defined it. While we found several non-validated questionnaires, we ultimately chose to use the Spanish version of the Juvenile Online Victimization–Questionnaire (JOV-Q; Montiel & Carbonell, 2012), which was a comprehensive survey assessing various forms of online juvenile victimization, including sexting. In collaboration with the author of the JOV-Q, Dr. Montiel, we modified the survey to create a new version specifically designed to measure sexting and online sexual victimization and perpetration. We did not alter the wording of the original sexting items, but we added items to gather more information on specific behaviours. For each measured item, we collected data on prevalence, frequency, motive, intensity of shared sexual content, and the distress or pleasure felt from the behaviour. This approach allowed us to collect a substantial amount of data on different sexting behaviours and understand the dynamics of these behaviours more deeply, and we are now in the process of validating our final sexting questionnaire.

4 Ethical and Emotional Aspects

The study of sexting behaviours is a sensitive and complex area of research that raises significant ethical and emotional considerations. Ethical concerns arise due to the potential harm that may result from research participation, particularly when it comes to collecting data on sensitive and private topics such as sexual behaviours. Researchers must ensure that they obtain informed consent from participants, protect their confidentiality and privacy, and avoid any harm or discomfort caused by their research. Additionally, sexting research involves exploring intimate aspects of people's lives, which may trigger emotional reactions such as shame, guilt, or embarrassment. Researchers must take into account the potential emotional impact of their research on participants and ensure that their research is carried out with sensitivity and empathy. Neglecting ethical and emotional aspects in sexting research may not only compromise the quality and validity of the research findings, but also have negative consequences for the well-being and dignity of research participants.

4.1 *Ethics Committee and Data Treatment*

Obtaining Ethics Committee approval was another crucial step in this process. In Spain, due to the need for increased monitoring and control over research, it has been mandatory for many years to undergo ethics approval by the university's Ethics Committee. This step was particularly sensitive in our study, as we were addressing a highly sensitive subject, namely sexting and sexual behaviours. Our first step was to complete the necessary paperwork and develop a research proposal, which was evaluated by the Ethics Committee Board. We included our questionnaire for review to assess the appropriateness of the questions. The Ethics Committee Board recommended that we clearly state the project's purpose and include all necessary data protection information in the consent form.

Additionally, the Ethics Committee provided feedback regarding the phrasing of the most sensitive sexting inquiries. However, since our survey questions were derived from a previously validated questionnaire, we ultimately received approval without having to alter the wording of the questions. The Ethics Committee emphasized the importance of affirmative consent prior to participants accessing the survey and provided several recommendations regarding the presentation and acquisition of consent. Researchers must recognize that a complicated consent process may influence the decision to participate and thus must strive to strike a balance between thoroughness and feasibility.

Researchers must stay abreast of new data protection laws in general, but those studying sexting and online sexual victimization must exercise even greater care as they will be gathering highly sensitive information regarding sexual behaviours. Therefore, researchers must employ more stringent data protection measures.

Following the ratification of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on 5 December, 2018, we have submitted various sexting projects for approval by the Ethics Committee, which have been subject to more rigorous data protection requirements than previously. Consequently, it is essential for researchers engaged in sexting studies to acknowledge the sensitivity of sexual information and establish ethical research protocols and robust data management plans.

To this end, the Ethics Committee requested that we prepare a data treatment plan and a Data Protection Impact Evaluation to outline how we would handle the collected data, given its sensitivity. Our institution had a Data Protection Officer who guided us through the process and designed the data management plan. We utilized an online survey platform that enabled us to anonymize the data and, upon completion of data collection, we used a safe online platform provided by the University. Only the four individuals involved in the research project had access to the data, which was also password-protected.

4.2 Ethical and Emotional Challenges

Scientific research, and especially social sciences research that examines sensitive topics such as sexting and online sexual victimization, needs to be extremely cautious and should be conducted following strict ethical principles and in accordance with the applicable legal framework. Institutions where research is conducted should also vail for researchers to follow those principles, and in our case, our study was approved by the Ethics Committee of our university, after a review board examined our research project.

Studies on sexting and online sexual victimization are highly sensitive and sensitivity affects every detail of the research in the field, from designing the approach to implementation and dissemination. Certain beliefs and social structures can make it difficult to participate or even conduct sexual health and sensitive research. Difficulties vary greatly from the prohibition of research on sexual victimization in certain contexts, to personal resistance to addressing the issue by the participants. It has been reported that the anonymity that surrounds online interactions might lead some individuals to be more open. Nevertheless, it should be noted that results on sexting and online sexual victimization are affected differently by the dominant culture of each society or social context.

Sexual abuse and violence are also considered sensitive in research as they can remind participants, who have been victims of traumatic events. This is especially true for methods such as in-depth interviews that can arouse painful emotions and memories in victims (Draucker, 1999), and probably not so relevant for online questionnaires, similarly as happens in sexting and online sexual victimization research. Yet, every study should include access to support resources to minimize the maleficent effects of evoking negative memories. This was the case for us, as the research team is equipped with psychiatrists and psychological consultants with the

necessary skills to provide support and could be accessed through the contact information provided in case of distress (AGM).

Finally, although we researchers often promote our research as objective, pure objectivity should be considered a myth, especially in social research. Our personal and professional concerns guide us when we choose what to focus on and the design of our research is influenced by our background and training. Our epistemic and ethical values are embedded in our choice of questions, methods of inquiry, and the way we report our findings. We must recognize that multiple issues shape the interpretation of our data and never present opinions or conjectures as research findings, which is especially important when we talk about sexuality-related research, as well as violence-related research.

Notwithstanding, sexuality has been a taboo for centuries. Yet, refusal to research on it leads to further misconceptions, which is why we must specially dedicate ourselves to these kinds of studies. Just as if we were in any intervention group, either initial resistance or some jokes and laughter from the listeners are common when talking about research in this field, even sometimes among colleagues. Although the denial is slowly dissipating, the barriers in this type of research continue to exist, foreign to the research group but also their own, and special attention must be paid to.

Nevertheless, overcoming barriers or trying to control possible biases has nothing to do with losing perspective on how sensitive this topic can be. This becomes a great concern for us when we deal with the youngest. I personally (ELGD) sometimes feel reluctant to research on sexual issues on minors due to uncertainty about the appropriate timing or language and feel similarly when we talk about other vulnerable populations (ELGD). We must take into account their stage of development and must be sure they can understand our approach. Above all, we must assess carefully the impact that our research can have on them.

This genuine concern of the researchers also coincides with the urgent need, in sensitive issues and work with minors, to have proper legal advice and to maintain the utmost respect for the rights of our participants and, where appropriate, their parents or legal representatives.

4.3 Sharing to Learn

Research design refers to the overall strategic plan that researchers select to address the research problem, ensuring that the evidence obtained yields sound conclusions and advances knowledge. However, it is common for researchers to commence their investigations prematurely without critically assessing the requirements to address the research problem, leading to weak conclusions. Similar to surgery, research also requires a steep learning curve.

In my (ELGD) experience, apart from training, skills, and attitudes, the solidity of the research design depends on the team's structure. During my PhD research, I did not have a research team around me, and I worked within a healthcare institution

that lacked a research background. My first opportunity to share my research design with other researchers came late in a European meeting of experts at Cardiff University, where they pointed out multiple weaknesses in my design. However, this was a valuable learning experience, and I could correct many of the weaknesses, but some remained. Therefore, the best advice for researchers is to share their work with others to learn and improve the research design, which is valid for all research phases.

Researchers should accept criticism and incorporate suggestions for improvement from the outset. This principle should guide researchers' careers because they can only progress in a network. Researchers must maintain the desire to share and learn continually, and this sharing is particularly enriching when it is diverse in every sense.

5 Final Reflections

In conclusion, and to summarize our experience in conducting psychosocial research with victims of sexting and online sexual victimization in Spain, the lessons we would like to share from our own research experience are:

1. Overcome your biases before entering the field.
2. Never lose perspective of how sensitive your object of study is.
3. Respect your scientific discipline, but your sample above all.
4. Do not be afraid to share: Sharing will allow you to enhance your own research and learn.
5. Learn to tolerate uncertainty: Research, especially at the beginning, can be hostile, lonely, anxious, frustrating, and uncertain, so knowing this beforehand can help you to be psychologically prepared.
6. Methodology in research is complex, so get into investigation with a solid background that can help you enjoy the process.
7. Online victimization research is still in its infancy and certain methodological aspects are not yet consolidated. Do not be afraid, look for scientific rigor, and appreciate the opportunity it represents.
8. Doing research without a structured research group is challenging and can be exhausting, so if you don't have access to a big, structured research group, find supervisors who can get involved in your research and support you.

Finally, when conducting psychosocial research on sexting and online sexual victimization in Spain, we believe it would be useful to enhance networking. Furthermore, future research on this topic should move towards applied research, so that the theoretical and conceptual information that up-to-date research has collected can be used in prevention and intervention programs.

However, and despite every difficulty we have shared in this chapter, we believe research is gratifying and vocational, and it's a way to give a little piece of us to society, in order to be able to understand better, intervene better, and help better,

especially when working with sexual violence and victims. Now that the victims of all kinds of sexual violence are beginning to take the leading role they deserve, we can feel like we are part of that progress. Keep that beautiful feeling inside you and let it renew your strength when weakness appears. Research is a long-distance race, with the incentive that there is no final goal, there will always be new objectives to pursue.

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Chapter 30

Researching Cyberbullying: A Colourful Palette of Methods and Experiences



Heidi Vandebosch  and Sara Pabian 

1 What Is Cyberbullying?

The rise and large-scale adoption of information and communication technologies has sparked academic interest in the study of online forms of aggression, such as cyberbullying. The often-cited definition of Smith et al. (2008: 376) describes cyberbullying as “An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself”. However, there are still ongoing discussions about whether and how the criteria that have been used to define traditional (offline) bullying (intent to hurt, repetition, and power imbalance) should and could be applied in an online context (Peter & Petermann, 2018). Related to that, there is still no consensus about how cyberbullying should be measured (Chun et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying can take many different forms (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Direct cyberbullying refers to those types of cyberbullying in which the victim is directly involved (e.g. insulting or threatening a person and sabotaging their use of ICT, excluding them from an online group). Indirect cyberbullying may take place without the (immediate) notice of the victim (e.g. spreading false rumours behind their back, creating a hate website, and outing personal information about the victim online). Cyberbullying may be perpetrated anonymously or not; in front of an audience or in private, using text, audio, and/or images; and via synchronous or asynchronous modes of communication (e.g. chat versus e-mail).

Cyberbullying has mostly been studied amongst younger age groups (i.e. primary and secondary school children and college students), as they are also involved

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in traditional (school-related) bullying and avid users of the (social) applications of technologies (Kowalski et al., 2014). However, research investigating workplace bullying (Kowalski et al., 2019) or taking a life-span approach to bullying (Barlett & Chamberlin, 2017) suggests that also adults are involved in cyberbullying (be it to a lesser extent). Cyberbullying involvement may take different forms: people may be a victim, a perpetrator or a bystander, or any combination of these roles.

Because cyberbullying may have an important impact on (especially victims') mental health (Marciano et al., 2020), research in the area of cyberbullying has gradually shifted from investigating the problem to developing and evaluating interventions aimed at preventing, detecting, and solving cyberbullying. Scholars in the field of cyberbullying – often stemming from different disciplines (e.g. psychology, criminology, law, sociology, communication science, computer science, and computational linguistics) – have used a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods to study this phenomenon. These methods, and the specific opportunities and challenges related to them, will be described more in depth in what follows. After referring to the existing literature, we will describe our personal experiences with each of these methods.

2 Methods Employed

2.1 *Cross-Sectional Surveys*

Surveys are a popular method in cyberbullying research (Bauman & Bellmore, 2014; Jenaro et al., 2018). Respondents have often been recruited via schools (or other offline contexts) or online (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2012). They have typically been asked to indicate their involvement in cyberbullying instances (as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander) in a certain reference period. Apart from that, they have been invited to provide information about their background characteristics, involvement in traditional bullying, ICT use, and other possible predictors or antecedents of their cyberbullying involvement, as well as to report information about possible consequences of cyberbullying involvement (e.g. anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms, coping behaviours) (Kowalski et al., 2014).

In our own studies on cyberbullying, we have regularly conducted cross-sectional school surveys among students in Flanders (Belgium), especially in the early years when data about cyberbullying prevalence and correlates were still lacking (see, for instance: Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). We noticed that schools were quite willing to participate in our studies, because they thought cyberbullying was an important problem that could also threaten the wellbeing of their own students and teachers. Nevertheless, also in the Flemish context, schools often said they were overwhelmed by requests to participate in scientific research. To increase the chance that school principals would agree to provide access to their schools, we provided them with information about our research group, promised them to send a short

report with the main findings for their school, and also suggested to them we would be willing to give a presentation about cyberbullying to students, teachers, or parents.

When analysing the data gathered via these school surveys, we also noticed that the results about the prevalence of cyberbullying varied greatly according to the specific items that we used in the questionnaire(s). For instance, one-item measurements, consisting of a direct question (e.g. “Have you been cyberbullied in the past six months?”), resulted in lower prevalence rates compared to indirect measurements where prevalence rates were measured for different (cyberbullying) acts (e.g. “How often in the past six months have you been excluded online?”; “How often have you been called names online?”). This reminded us, for instance in our communication with policymakers and the press, of the importance of mentioning the exact way we measured cyberbullying, when talking about the percentages of students who – according to our survey(s) – had been the victim, perpetrator, or bystander of cyberbullying.

To solve some of the disadvantages of self-report, retrospective cross-sectional surveys, several other methods have been used. First, following the approaches that have been used in traditional bullying research, some scholars have included peer-nomination methods. Students are then asked to indicate which peers have (been) cyberbullied (by) others, which may be an ethically challenging thing to do. In a study where we combined self-report and peer-report measures (Wegge et al., 2016), we also observed that these two measures generated very different results. Students who identified themselves as cyberbullies or as cyber victims were not always identified by others as such (and vice versa). Second, to avoid the problem of recall (related to retrospective surveys), some studies have relied on ecological momentary assessment (EMA) methods such as daily diaries or experience sampling methods (ESM). Respondents are then asked to report their involvement in cyberbullying and other expected predictors or outcomes at one or more specific moments during the day within a given period (Espinoza, 2015). While this method allows respondents to report things while, or shortly after, they are or have been happening, a risk may be that cyberbullying events are too uncommon to guarantee that they will occur during the specific period of investigation. In our own electronic diary study amongst dual earning couples with adolescent children (Vranjes et al., 2021), we therefore chose to measure acts of online aggression, rather than “real” cyberbullying. Because we were also aware of the efforts that this study requested from the participants, we provided a monetary incentive for participation (100 Euro per family).

2.2 *Experimental Studies*

While surveys have been a popular method since the start of the research on cyberbullying, experimental studies have gradually also become a widely used method (Chan et al., 2021). Unlike surveys, experiments allow us to draw causal inferences.

In cyberbullying studies, researchers have created stimulus materials in the form of written scenarios or situations on mock-up social networking sites, game sites, or chat applications to test whether certain characteristics of the portrayed situations influence respondents' perceptions, attitudes, or behaviours. For instance, so-called vignette studies have been used to test which elements (e.g. intent to hurt, power imbalance, repetition, anonymity, and publicity) respondents deem important to label a certain situation as "cyberbullying" (Menesini et al., 2012), or to investigate which elements (perceived popularity of the perpetrator, medium, and type of bullying) influence the severity perception of, and the way of coping with, a certain victimization experience (Pieschl et al., 2013). Many experimental studies in the field of cyberbullying also focus on unravelling which factors influence cyberbullying bystanders' perceptions and actions (Dillon & Bushman, 2015; You & Lee, 2019).

In our own studies, we have used an experimental set-up to study what personal and situational factors influence bystanders' behaviour (Bastiaensens et al., 2014). We manipulated the severity of the cyberbullying incident by creating a vignette with a verbal form of cyberbullying (less severe) and a picture-based form of cyberbullying (i.e. showing, and commenting on, a person sitting on a toilet) (more severe). Furthermore, the behaviour (i.e. defending or bullying) and the identity of the other bystanders (friends versus acquaintances) varied across the vignettes. We then asked adolescents (in a paper-and-pencil school survey) what they would do if they witnessed such a post on Facebook (which was at that time the most popular social networking site amongst adolescents in Flanders). In this study, we were well aware of the fact that we assumed that the respondents would be able to imagine this situation taking place online (with persons they knew in real life) and be able to indicate for a wide range of behaviours what they were less or more likely to do in such a situation. It is clear from this example that experimental studies do indeed lack external validity. Being confronted with a situation on paper as a participant in a survey conducted in the school context, and being offered many behavioural options, is not the same as experiencing such a situation (with persons you know to a greater or lesser extent) online, behind your smartphone or computer screen in a private context, and having to consider yourself what to do.

Apart from experimental studies that have tried to advance the knowledge on cyberbullying, there are also experimental studies that have tested the effects of cyberbullying interventions, either in a lab or in the field (Doty et al., 2021). Many of these interventions are designed to be used in a school environment and take the form of a "whole-school intervention", or a more focused intervention (Cantone et al., 2015; Gaffney et al., 2018). These school-based intervention programs use offline or online modes of delivery, or a combination of both (Nocentini et al., 2015). The effectivity of these interventions is often tested using a RCT or a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-measures (Doty et al., 2021). Other interventions focus on preventing, detecting, and dealing with cyberbullying in the online contexts where they take place (e.g. on social media platforms) (Topcu-Uzer & Tanrikulu, 2018). Still other interventions make use of technologies (e.g. games, mobile phone apps, and websites) to reach and support the target group(s) of the

cyberbullying intervention outside the context of schools and apart from the online contexts where the cyberbullying is taking place. Some authors have, for instance, investigated how a stand-alone mobile phone app can support cyberbullying victims (Kutok et al., 2021).

In our own research, we used a field experiment to test the effect of playing a digital game designed to promote positive bystandership in cases of cyberbullying amongst secondary school students (DeSmet et al., 2017). As is often the case in cyberbullying intervention research, it was not possible in our study to randomly assign individual students to the experimental and control condition (as is required for an RCT). Instead, we opted for a cluster-randomized control (where the randomization takes place at a higher level, namely at the level of classes or schools). The greatest challenge we faced was finding schools (for the intervention and the control group) that were comparable enough. In addition, we were aware that naturally occurring events in these schools (e.g. cyberbullying cases that took place during the period of investigation, and the way they were dealt with) could partly explain the changes in cyberbullying behaviours and determinants that we observed over time.

In another experimental study, we tested the potential effectiveness of reflective interfaces (i.e. pop-up messages that make people think twice before they actually post a derogatory comment on a social media site) to prevent young people's engagement in slut-shaming (Van Royen et al., 2017). We created and pre-tested a fictitious but realistic scenario that could provoke slut-shaming comments (i.e. a situation on Facebook in which a girl, named Merel, posted a public status update revealing that her friend, named Hanna, had stolen her boyfriend) and integrated this stimulus in an online survey experiment. Students (from 6 secondary schools) who indicated they were inclined to post a slut-shaming comment in response to this scenario were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (referring to different types of reflective interfaces or a mere time delay condition), and after exposure to this interface, asked whether they would still like to post their comment. The fact that the survey was administered online might have enhanced its realism. However, here too, the conclusions that we drew on the basis of participants' one-time exposure to a pop-up message in a research context might not be generalizable to the real context (where respondents might be exposed to these messages several times, and the repetitive exposure could impact the messages' effectiveness). In addition, the use of a mock ICT platform or social media situation in an experimental study also poses important ethical challenges. When creating such (more) realistic online environments to study cyberbullying-related behaviours, it might be harmful to suggest that participants are being victimized or to ask them to engage in (simulated) cyberbullying behaviours. For this reason, we thought it was very important to take precautionary measures. During our online experiment, for instance, the respondents could press the "stop button" at any time. (This action would end their participation in the study.) After the study, there was also an extensive debriefing. A class conversation was held about online (sexual) harassment and its impact. Furthermore, all students received an information leaflet mentioning the details of professional services they could consult and the contact details of the researchers.

2.3 *Longitudinal Studies*

Many of the first quantitative studies on cyberbullying were cross-sectional in nature. The need for additional, longitudinal research was expressed soon after, in order to disentangle the directionality of the relationships between variables (see, for example, Espinoza & Juvonen, 2012). As the systematic review by Camerini et al. (2020) on longitudinal studies on cyberbullying victimization and perpetration among children and adolescents published between 2007 and 2017 illustrates, this call was also answered. This systematic review (which did not take into account intervention studies, nor cyberbullying studies that focused on bystanders) shows that the number of longitudinal studies increased sharply in 2012 and peaked in 2016. Most of the included studies ($n = 76$) collected two waves of data (72%), while the remaining ones collected data at three to five points in time. The most frequent study designs reported a baseline and a follow-up assessment after 6 months (21%) or 12 months (29%). As was observed for cross-sectional surveys, data collections were typically carried out in schools, although a limited number of studies also made use of commercial online panels and a social media platform. Longitudinal studies within the field of cyberbullying have looked at, for instance, predictors and outcomes of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration (Marciano et al., 2020), perpetration and victimization dynamics over time (Marciano et al., 2020), developmental trajectories (see, for instance: Pabian & Vandebosch, 2014), and the long-term impact of cyberbullying interventions (Cross et al., 2015).

As longitudinal studies often rely on self-report questionnaires that are administered by pupils in a school context, they also face similar problems as cross-sectional surveys. In addition, longitudinal surveys are confronted with some specific challenges. For instance, it might be difficult to design a questionnaire that can be used for a longer period of time, as cyberbullying takes place on specific online platforms and the technological environment (and people's use of technologies) changes rapidly over time. Hence, what is a popular medium or application at one point in time might not be so anymore 2, 3, or even more years later (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2012). Researchers can take this issue into account by not focusing on specific platforms in their longitudinal studies, but rather measuring features of platforms on which cyberbullying might take place (e.g. option for direct messaging, possibility to interact anonymously).

Furthermore, attrition poses a threat to longitudinal studies as maintaining sample integrity is critical to producing rigorous research (Mishna et al., 2017). It may be especially relevant in research on young people in schools, as they, for instance, transition from one school to another and these changes could be directly related to cyberbullying. Hence, different measures could (and should) be taken to promote participant retention. In our own longitudinal studies where we administered self-report questionnaires among pupils in schools during multiple waves (e.g. Pabian et al., 2016), we applied the measures described by Mishna et al. (2017) to limit attrition rates (building relationships with schools and pupils, using mail-based surveys to follow up students that graduated). Attrition is unavoidable when collecting

data in schools as young people can change schools over time, be absent due to, for instance, sickness, during one or more of the measurement points, or decide to no longer participate in the study. In order to avoid the latter, we collected data during class time, upon agreement with the teacher(s) as a replacement for a lesson, to avoid pupils needing to give up breaks or leisure time for participating. Teachers were present during data collection, but were not allowed to help students or to look into their answers. We also put a lot of effort into making the questionnaires attractive and user-friendly, and not unnecessary long, for instance by adding pictures, using a font size that was not too small, and by indicating their progress throughout the survey. Finally, incentives were provided. In our longitudinal studies, we provided a lottery ticket to win a cinema ticket after every participation. The lottery ticket was a separate form (not attached to the survey) on which students could leave their contact details if they wanted to participate in the raffle. Their contact details were processed separately from the surveys and were in no way linked to their answers. Every student that started a survey received a lottery ticket and full completion of the survey was not necessary; therefore, students were not obliged to answer questions they did not want to answer.

Another attention point we believe is important in the design of a longitudinal study is the time lag or period between measurement points. To facilitate statistical data analyses, time lags between each measurement point have ideally the same length. In our own studies we used time lags of 6 months, but other researchers used shorter (e.g. 1 or 3 month(s)) or longer (e.g. 12 months) lags. Short time lags do not allow to, for instance, investigate long-term outcomes of cyberbullying involvement, whereas long time lags are less suitable to investigate situational predictors of cyberbullying involvement. In addition, with longer time lags, it might be harder to keep students motivated to continue participating in the study.

2.4 Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

Apart from the quantitative methods described above, research on cyberbullying has also used qualitative methods such as focus groups and individual interviews. Cyberbullying research that has made use of focus groups has mostly involved young people (or their parents and teachers) to gather information about their perceptions of and experiences with the phenomenon. For instance, in one of our early focus group studies on cyberbullying, we tried to gather data on how cyberbullying was defined by young people themselves (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). This qualitative method was also used to gain more insights into the experiences and coping strategies of victims (Jacobs et al., 2015), the behaviours of bystanders (as well as their determinants) (DeSmet et al., 2013), and the (potential) motives of perpetrators (Compton et al., 2014). Focus groups on cyberbullying have allowed to generate data, theories, and hypotheses that could later be tested in survey studies or have been explicitly used to explain the findings of surveys (see for instance: Smith et al., 2008). Focus groups have also proven to be beneficial in the context of

cyberbullying intervention development. In the study of Bowler et al. (2014), for instance, two focus groups (one composed of teens and one composed of undergraduate students) were involved in a narrative inquiry. They had to develop cyberbullying stories and – in a next step – think about design recommendations for social media that could help to address cyberbullying events before or while they were unfolding. We ourselves also used focus groups with youngsters to test the concept for a digital game prototype that aimed to promote positive bystander behaviours (Van Cleemput et al., 2016) and to ask adolescents' opinions about the desirability of automatic monitoring of content on social networking sites (Van Royen et al., 2016).

Most focus group studies in the field of cyberbullying have been conducted in the offline school context. The number of focus groups that have been involved in these studies varies considerably (from, for instance, 2 in the study of Bowler et al. (2014) to 53 in the study of Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008)). There is also some variation in the size and the composition of the focus groups. Some have worked with groups of 4–5 participants (Bowler et al., 2014), while others have worked with groups of 7–8 participants (Smith et al., 2008). Regarding the composition of the groups, it is clear that researchers have mostly worked with respondents who already knew each other from the school context. While some have focused on creating groups that involve respondents of the same age, others have (also) taken into account the gender of the participants (thus creating separate groups for girls and boys, for instance (Agatston et al., 2007)) or their involvement in cyberbullying (e.g. working with only cyberbullying victims, for instance). The focus group conversations are oftentimes recorded on tape or video, and later literally transcribed and analysed.

While focus groups have proven to provide important insights on cyberbullying, they too, of course, know some challenges. For instance, it might be very delicate to invite young people to talk about personal cyberbullying experiences during a group conversation, as they might not feel safe to do so in the presence of (certain) peers and (adult) researchers. Therefore, in the focus groups we have conducted in the past (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), we encouraged the participants to more generally talk about cyberbullying (without referencing to any concrete cyberbullying events they themselves, and perhaps also other participants in the group, were involved in). As suggested by Bouchard (2016), it might also be interesting to use online forums for focus groups on sensitive topics (such as cyberbullying), for this reason. The (perceived) online anonymity associated with online fora (or other group-based applications) leads to a disinhibition effect: participants are less inclined to formulate socially desirable answers and feel freer to formulate their true attitudes and opinions. Especially for victims, online alternatives may also be helpful for opening up about their experiences and the way they tried to deal with them. These online alternatives might further be divided into synchronous and asynchronous methods. Synchronous methods allow for real-time conversations (e.g. via chat groups) and in this way also mimic face-to-face focus groups. Asynchronous methods (e.g. online forums) provide the participants more time to reflect upon and to formulate their responses.

Another way of providing participants a safe(r) space to talk about their personal experiences is, of course, by conducting individual, in-depth interviews. In cyberbullying research, this qualitative method has mostly been used to gather information amongst cyberbullying victims about the type of experience they went through, the way they tried to cope with it, and its perceived short- and long-term impact (Šléglová & Černá, 2011). Some scholars have also used in-depth interviews to gain insights into the perspectives of different participants (e.g. young people, teachers, parents) about the same cyberbullying case (Pabian et al., 2018; Villarejo-Carballido et al., 2019). In addition, interviews were sometimes used to get input from, for instance, experts. For instance, Milosevic (2015) spoke about social media companies' cyberbullying policies with 27 persons. Amongst them were social media companies' representatives, representatives from e-safety NGOs from the United States and the European Union that work with social media companies on their cyberbullying policies, as well as with non-affiliated e-safety consultants.

In our research, we have applied multiple forms of individual interviews, including in-depth interviews (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2021) and photo-elicitation interviews (Pabian et al., 2018). For instance, in-depth interviews were used as a research method to investigate the perceived long-term impact of cyberbullying victimization (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2021). Recruitment of participants was done via an online survey. This qualitative research method allowed us to have an in-depth understanding of the (cyber)bullying events that happened during childhood and/or adolescence and how these events still impact adults' lives today. Another form of interviews that we used are photo-elicitation interviews (Pabian et al., 2018). Students, recruited via a school, were asked to collect images (e.g. screenshots), at least three per day, of their (online) interactions with peers during five consecutive days, before the interview took place. We used the images during the interview as ice breakers, to start the interview, but we also experienced that the images were helpful in recalling (negative) interactions. For both types of individual interviews, we have experienced that providing a safe environment to speak out freely is extremely important. First, we advise that conversations about cyberbullying experiences with young people take place in a quiet, familiar environment (e.g. meeting room at school or at home), outside hearing distance of others (including other pupils, teachers, parents, and siblings). Second, participants should feel at ease with the interviewer. In our photo-elicitation study where pupils had to collect images before taking the interview, we organized a "getting to know each other" session at the start of the data collection, to explain the procedure of the study and what was expected from the participant as well as to familiarize with each other. This session (+– 1 h) took place in the classroom during school hours.

2.5 Online Methods

As was illustrated in the previous sections, technologies have provided researchers means to conduct surveys, experiments, focus groups, and in-depth interviews about cyberbullying (also) online. However, as the phenomenon under study (i.e. cyberbullying) is taking place online, researchers might also try to observe and analyse it there. In this way, they can study cyberbullying in natural circumstances and do not have to rely on what participants report they are doing online, but rather see what they are actually doing online.

Scholars have, for instance, studied cyberbullying dynamics by investigating young people's public profiles on social networking sites such as AskFM (Young et al., 2018), the Danish SNS Arto (Kofoed, 2010) and Bebo in the UK (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012), and on a popular public SNS in Sweden (Sylwander, 2019). Others have examined aggressive interactions in public Facebook groups (Rachoené & Oyedemi, 2015) or on gaming platforms. Some of these studies followed a (n)ethnographic approach and examined the profiles over a longer period of time, taking into account an extensive body of interactions (i.e. written posts, memes, links, and videos) (Sylwander, 2019), (sometimes) triangulating the data with data generated by other methods (e.g. in-depth interviews with and observations of the respondents in offline contexts) (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012), and focusing on a qualitative analysis. Others (Young et al., 2018) screened a SNS using search strings (e.g. phrases such as "kill yourself and die") that might indicate cyberbullying instances.

Apart from scholars that have tried to investigate naturally occurring cyberbullying dynamics, there are also scholars who have analysed online contents related to cyberbullying (but that do not constitute cyberbullying in themselves). Alim (2015) and Alim and Khalid (2019), for instance, examined the support and advice for cyberbullying victims on Twitter and Facebook. In one of our own studies, we investigated cyberbullying victims' posts on the forum of a help website for young people, as well as other people's responses (Bastiaensens et al., 2019).

While the above-mentioned studies investigated cyberbullying by relying on relatively small samples of publicly available online data retrieved from Social Networking Sites and coding the information manually, the field of computational linguistics has focused on the development of automatic detection systems for cyberbullying. These systems screen large amounts of content and are able to classify them, based on rule-based models or machine learning approaches (Van Royen et al., 2015). While these systems have mainly been developed to support the moderation systems of Social Networking Sites, they could, of course, also be used by researchers. Whittaker and Kowalski (2015), for instance, already applied a similar approach. They used Salesforce's Radian6 to search and retrieve posts from different social networking sites that could potentially represent examples of real-world cyberbullying (by formulating a list of search terms – such as "idiot," "fag," "slut," "dick," "bitch," and "asshole" – and modifiers such as "what a" and "you're a"). Posts were then downloaded from the past 90 days (April–June 2013). In total, over the period of time the study was run, 180,215 posts were downloaded, 116,881 from

Facebook, 2343 from forum posts, 32,404 from forum replies, and 28,587 from comments. A random sample of 3000 posts was then selected from these data, and manually coded by two researchers to be able to assess trends regarding where online aggression occurs most frequently and to whom the cyberbullying is most typically addressed.

As cyberbullying can also take place in private online communication spaces (e.g. in chat conversations or private groups), methods that rely only on publicly available online data do not suffice to study this phenomenon. For this reason, some researchers have also tried to gain access to the communication that takes place via these channels. In their study, Underwood et al. (2012), for instance, provided adolescents with BlackBerry devices with service plans paid by the researchers. With the permission of the respondents and their parents, the phones were configured so that the content of all text, e-mail, and instant messages was saved to a secure server and organized in a highly secure, searchable, online archive. The researchers could access this information and examine, for instance, whether the messages contained negative interactions. Since this study in 2012, using tracking or logging software to obtain data about certain characteristics of people's smartphone use (e.g. their time spent online, their use of different types of apps) has become more common in scientific research (Deng et al., 2019), while using this software to retrieve the actual content of (private) communication via mobile phones is still challenging (due to obvious privacy and ethical concerns) (Hussong et al., 2021). In addition, researchers can now rely on automatic content analysis to distill trends in the data (e.g. based on machine learning techniques) (Zydziunaite, 2019).

While the use of online methods to retrieve and analyse cyberbullying-related data has clear advantages, it also has several disadvantages. For instance, when studying online interactions on publicly available platforms, the fact that people can hide their true identity might make it difficult to draw any conclusions about the characteristics of those involved in cyberbullying. Furthermore, it might be very difficult for researchers, human moderators, but also automatic detection systems to assign meaning to what people express online, as they often lack contextual information (e.g. about the relationship between the parties involved) (O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003). This was also what we experienced first-hand, when we were involved in an interdisciplinary project aiming at developing an automatic detection system for cyberbullying (and other problematic) content that could support human moderators of social media platforms: AMICA. To illustrate: When people are saying that someone is a "slut" online, this might indicate an aggressive interaction (between "equals"), an incident of cyberbullying (in a relationship of power imbalance, and as part of intended and repeated aggression), or just a "normal" interaction between joking friends. So (only) scanning for derogatory language might result in the detection of many "false positives". On the other hand, some forms of cyberbullying might also be very subtle (and not recognizable for outsiders), leading to "false negatives". Online methods might not only pose challenges with regard to the validity of the results, but also with regard to ethics. For instance, when studying publicly available profiles and platforms, researchers have not always sought (or been able to seek) informed consent of those involved in the study (the fact that

people posted something “publicly” does not suffice to conclude they would also agree to be part of a study). To protect their study subjects, researchers have often taken precautionary measures to hide their identity (e.g. by not including literally citations that can easily be “googled” and in this way lead to the specific participants). In studies that have focused on investigating private online conversations and have asked for active consent to be able to do this, participants might still display reactance (and “unnatural” behaviours). To address the issue of data autonomy and privacy concerns related to external tracking systems, some authors have also suggested the idea of “data donating” (Ohme et al., 2021, p. 294): “rather than having researchers interfere with users’ devices and install applications to gain remote access to user data, with data donations, users provide researchers with data that have already been collected by their devices or platforms”.

3 Ethical and Emotional Aspects of Cyberbullying Research

As cyberbullying research often involves young people and deals with transgressive and harmful behaviours, it requires scholars to carefully reflect upon ethical and emotional issues. Mishna et al. (2004) describe the ethical challenges that are typical for (qualitative) research with young people, especially on a sensitive topic such as bullying.

The first challenge relates to consent and assent. Getting informed consent from participants is important in all research dealing with human subjects. However, it supposes the capacity to appreciate the decision to be made and the associated risks and benefits of proceeding or not proceeding with participation in a study. For this reason, legislation often requires that parents provide informed consent when their (underaged) children are invited to participate in a study. Once parents or other caregivers have provided consent, it is important (and in line with Children’s Rights) to also ask children themselves if they are interested and willing to participate (assent) in research. Researchers should therefore try to inform children as good as possible about the study. This might not always be easy, as children’s relative lack of life experience might make it difficult for them to envision the impact of participating in a study. In our own research, we typically (a) use information leaflets and informed consent forms that are formulated in a language that is understandable for the target group (e.g. children from primary or secondary school), (b) complement this with an oral explanation, and (c) invite the (potential) young respondents to ask further questions. In addition, we emphasize the fact that they can stop their participation whenever they want. In case they experience negative feelings during the research, which they did or could not anticipate for, they thus do not have to proceed.

However, the power imbalance between the (adult) researcher and the child can make it difficult for a child to actually withdraw from a study. The felt pressure to participate (or to continue participating) might be higher in a face-to-face qualitative study, than in an online qualitative study (Gibson, 2020) or in an anonymous

survey. Researchers should therefore also be attentive to any verbal or non-verbal signs that reveal children's discomfort with participating in the study.

The second challenge concerns balancing the obligation to protect children from harm while also ensuring children's rights to confidentiality. Especially in qualitative (cyber)bullying research, children might reveal traumatic victimization experiences, and the researcher has to decide whether to do something about this (e.g. tell their parents or teachers) or not. Mishna et al. (2004) suggest evaluating each case on its own and involving the child in a discussion on the strategy to pursue. While conducting our research on cyberbullying in schools, we have experienced a few instances where we, as researchers, felt the need to do something, given the seriousness of the acts. In these cases, we decided to contact the teacher to notify them about the potential involvement of students in serious cyberbullying cases, without telling their names and their role (victim, perpetrator, and/or bystander) in these cases.

The third, and last, challenge that Mishna et al. (2004) mention refers to ensuring that children have fair access to research initiatives and the benefits that come from research endeavors. The authors also link these aspects to ideas about empowerment and to participatory (action) research approaches. Children should not only be considered as participants in surveys, in-depth interviews, etc., they can also be actively involved in earlier stages of the research process, e.g. when formulating research questions, or in later stages of the research process, e.g. when interpreting or communicating about the results (see also: Dennehy et al., 2019). Furthermore, they can be an important actor in social change processes that aim to tackle the cyberbullying problem, as some intervention-related studies that relied on young people's creative, problem-solving input, have already demonstrated (Bowler et al., 2014; Hawk et al., 2019; Spears et al., 2021).

As already indicated above, being involved in cyberbullying research can have an impact on participants' emotions. When young people are reminded of their own involvement in cyberbullying, especially as a victim, but also as a perpetrator or a bystander, this can potentially elicit a range of negative feelings such as distress, anger, shame, or powerlessness. Researchers are required to protect their (young) research participants from (emotional) harm. They can, for instance, do this by providing (psychological) support during the research or by referring the young participants to people and organizations that can help them. As demonstrated by Fahie (2014) in his qualitative research on workplace bullying amongst adults, researchers might also experience harmful consequences of the research process. When witnessing or researching distressing events or stories, they themselves may experience distress at second hand (referred to as "vicarious traumatization").

In our own studies on cyberbullying, we took these ethical and emotional considerations into account during different phases of our research. When asking for consent, we provided (1) an overview of the kind of data that would be collected and/or the sensitive topics that would be addressed; (2) an overview of the potential (emotional) risks and benefits of participating in the study; (3) options to withdraw from the study at any point of time, including the option to remove data after the data collection was finished; (4) confidentiality assurances; and (5) contact information

of the involved researchers as well as contact information of the Ethical board that approved the study and/or the data protection manager. When we collected data, we paid attention to signs of discomfort and respondents/participants were reminded of the option to stop at any time. Interviews were always held by trained interviewers who were well versed with the topic and method and who were aware of the potential emotional impact on the participant and the interviewer. At the end of the data collection (e.g. end of a survey or interview), we provided (again) contact information of the involved researchers and information on who to contact (e.g. in the form of an information sheet or folder) in case the respondent/participant wanted to seek (psychological) support.

4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the wide range of research methods that have been used in cyberbullying research over the years, including descriptions of our own experiences with these methods. Because cyberbullying is a phenomenon that has mainly been studied among children and adolescents, special attention has been paid to the specificities of conducting research amongst these age groups (e.g. how to gain access to young participants and what are the ethical issues involved).

It is clear that while cross-sectional survey studies were most common in the first phases of cyberbullying research, they were later complemented with qualitative studies (in-depth interviews and focus groups), experimental research, and longitudinal surveys. For each of these traditional social sciences methods, the online environment also created new possibilities: e.g. online surveys helped to reach a geographically diverse group; online interviews and focus groups lowered the barriers to participate, supported the disclosure of personal experiences, and created a more balanced researcher-participant due to the perceived anonymity and the mediated (and sometimes a-synchronous) nature of the communication; and online experiments integrated mock-up SNS to increase the ecological validity of the research. While the aforementioned methodological approaches mainly relied on participants' self-reports (which could be biased due to recall or social desirability issues), the described online methods (e.g. digital ethnography and manual or automatic content analyses) focused on people's actual online behaviours (e.g. what do people post on social media?). Researchers (or machine learning systems) then had the (difficult) task to assign meaning to the observed actions (i.e. do they constitute real "cyberbullying" or not?). In sum, throughout the chapter, it became clear that technological innovations have not only changed the nature of the phenomenon under study over time, but also the research methods that are used to investigate it.

Another trend that was noticed in research on cyberbullying was a growing attention for the perspective and active participation of (young) people. Different factors could explain this observation: a growing awareness amongst the scientific community about the importance of involving the general public in all stages of scientific research (cfr. the idea of citizen science); the application of the framework of

“Children’s Rights” to research activities; the gradual shift from cyberbullying research that is mainly focused on the “problem” to cyberbullying research that is focused on finding “solutions” (together with the target population); and the multi-disciplinary interest in the topic of cyberbullying, with disciplines that more commonly use participatory (and creative) approaches (e.g. design sciences) possibly inspiring other disciplines.

The opportunities and challenges described in this chapter on research on cyberbullying amongst young people may inspire other research on (online) transgressive and harmful behaviours amongst younger and older audiences. For instance, it is clear that researchers in the area of cyberbullying are well aware of the potential emotional impact of participation in a study amongst young victims. They have also thought about ways to deal with this (e.g. by providing or referring to psychological support). These kinds of good practices can also be used by researchers that study other (online) transgressive behaviours. On the other hand, cyberbullying researchers seem to have paid less attention to the practical, ethical, etc. concerns related to studying cyberbullying perpetration (e.g. how to find “cyberbullies” and how to deal with them?) and could also learn from good practices developed by researchers that focus on studying other types of perpetrators or offenders. Finally, we would like to draw attention to the fact that doing research on cyberbullying might not only have a negative emotional impact on the study participants, but also on the researchers themselves. Hence, it is important to also train and support scholars in coping with these potential negative work experiences.

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Chapter 31

Researching Hate: Negotiating the Digital as Field Site in the Study of Extremist Cultures and Propaganda Online



Ashley A. Mattheis 

Researchers studying hate, extremism, and political violence are presented with unique ethical and methodological questions rooted in the nature of their topic of study. Along with academic norms for conducting research responsibly, those studying these phenomena in digital contexts must also navigate conducting research in relation to local and international legal requirements and variable approaches to internet governance. Furthermore, digital spaces and social media environments can often prove hostile to researchers, particularly marginalized (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and women) scholars who disseminate their findings or engage with the academic community and public scholarship on these platforms. This gives rise to a series of ethical and methodological concerns: What, then, are the ethical requirements for conducting research on hateful or violent digital cultures? Is it safe to conduct research on digital cultures that target the researcher's own identity group? How should researchers protect themselves from immersion in violent, hateful digital spaces and content? Are pieces of digital content considered texts, ephemera, speech, individual, or community expressions, and how should this shape ethical and methodological approaches? Can digital content be separated from the participants interacting with it?

This chapter explores these types of ethical and methodological questions in relation to qualitative digital research practices in the study of extremism. It argues that digital research is “field work”, whether the scholar is conducting textual or participatory research. And, as such ethical and methodological questions about user and community harms, as well as researcher safety, typically reserved for in-place fieldwork, must become part of all digital researchers' repertoires. This claim is rooted in the author's decade of experience researching the media practices, and

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visual propaganda of far-right extremist, male supremacist, QAnon, and #Trad digital cultures in the contemporary US context.

This chapter addresses my general research approach, specifically ethics, methodology, and methods used across several research projects. My research is not participant research, it is text-based critical research. My research, conducted at a very high output research university (R1) in the United States, did not require formal ethical review by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), instead ethical frameworks were developed through my training and in discussion with my supervisors and colleagues.

The various project experiences that contribute to my discussion below were conducted using online texts and data manually gathered from websites and social media. Topics were sourced from new stories as well as my own web searches. These projects typically combined visual and discursive analyses of memes, videos, website materials, and blog texts with commentary on Men's Rights Activist and other "manosphere" sites, Far-Right Accelerationist public Telegram channels (Mattheis, 2022), Far-Right women influencers' video channels, as well as extremist and radical messaging in #TradWife and "momosphere" blog and social media posts.¹ Each of these projects aimed to provide a view to the way of extremist digital cultures' communicative practices online using propaganda and rhetoric, with an emphasis (in most cases) on understanding how gendered logics are used to promote racial hate and violence. Importantly, the so-called "difficult and dangerous" nature of these cultures must not change the ethical requirements of responsible conduct of (digital) research (Conway, 2021); it does, however, make it necessary for researchers to make personal but transparent choices about their methodological stances and methods used to successfully balance ethical concerns.

1 Digital Cultures of Extremism

Extremist far-right, male supremacist, as well as racial, religious, and gender hate groups, participants, and ideologues have been online since the inception of the World Wide Web in 1991. Conway et al. (2019) show that these cultures are early adopters of web-based technologies and digital media using them to connect across geographies. The rise of digital hate cultures remained relatively interior to the hate milieu online until two technological developments made web publishing and social networking much more accessible. First, web-2.0 technologies and affordances offered easily-to-use web creation tools and publishing formats available along with increased up and download speeds, particularly for images and video content, and reduced the costs of access and hardware (Singer & Brooking, 2019). Second, the

¹This discussion refers to my full range of published projects (listed in the references section) along with various short blog posts completed as a fellow with the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and as an associate member of the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) available on their respective websites.

rise of social media and smart technologies enabled increased social networking among the populace along with the capacity to circulate extremist content to ever widening and often unaware populations of users (Singer & Brooking, 2019). After these changes, hateful and violent ideologies began to circulate broadly across the web and social media, often through meme cultures pushed out into normative social platforms from darker spaces like 4Chan (Singer & Brooking, 2019). Along with this, social media platforms, as businesses, have developed affordances and features intended to keep users engaged as a foundational aspect of the business model which are leveraged by extremist content producers (Roose, 2019). Thus, hate cultures have, since the 2010s, become entrenched into popular consciousness particularly through their capitalization on and coordinated use of digital technologies and practices.

Extremist and hateful digital cultures and participants have also successfully utilized online phenomena to spread their messaging and ideology. Three primary examples of this are as follows: (1) the far-right and male supremacist appropriation of #GamerGate (the first long-term, globally coordinated, networked harassment campaign that mobilized extreme misogyny and anti-feminism under the guise of ethical concerns with gaming journalism) which is credited by far-right and mansphere ideologues with “red pilling” many followers and creating the toolkit for all subsequent networked harassment campaigns; (2) the attempted shifting of the Overton Window (a term used to describe the acceptable range – window – of political discourses) and supposed incursion into politics of far-right digital cultures through the inception of the “Great Meme War” in the 2015–16 US Presidential Election cycle and subsequent use of “memetic warfare” by extremist cultures online; and (3) the adaptation and use of digital marketing practices including influencer marketing and alternative news media (Lewis, 2018; Phillips, 2018). Hateful content and interactions associated with these ideologies have thus become ubiquitous in many peoples’ online and social media experience and have entangled digital engagement with politics, news, and current events.

Crucially, hostile digital “warfare” tactics such as networked harassment, doxxing, and swatting have become common digital practices used to intimidate and silence identified outgroup members and other targets of hate (Mattheis et al., 2022). *Networked harassment* occurs through so-called “pile on” or “shaming” campaigns where a multiplicity of harassers work together to bully and threaten targets. Alice Marwick (2021) has shown how networked harassment is often morally motivated and used as a mechanism for regulating and maintaining the social order, and as such, is often targeted at marginalized populations online (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and women). *Doxxing* is a practice involving the public release of targets’ private information online paired with calls to harm or harass those targets. In some cases, family members or close associates of targets may also be doxxed to further pressure and harass individual targets. *Swatting* is a practice where hackers or internet trolls call the police to falsely report in-progress violent crimes at a target’s address, resulting in SWAT teams being deployed erroneously. It is a particularly dangerous tactic that has led to the deaths of innocent people. Such tactics, particularly doxxing and networked harassment, are regularly used against academic targets online

by these cultures with only relatively recent attention and few institutionalized measures of support or protection (franzke et al., 2020; Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021).

2 Conducting Online Research on Extremism

Researchers studying extremist cultures and phenomena online are also regularly subject to abuse by extremists using the same tactics and harassment (mentioned in the prior section) in attempts to silence them. Moreover, scholars holding marginalized identities (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and women) along with early career researchers (ECRs) are often more likely to experience such targeted harassment. This is rapidly becoming a cross-disciplinary discussion in the field loosely called Extremism Studies (Pearson et al., 2023). In addition, regular engagement with and immersion in analysis of “difficult data” can also produce a range of mental and emotional effects for researchers (Winter, 2019). Constant exposure to hateful or violent content (text, image, music, video, etc.) can have cumulative negative effects over the long term, even if the researcher does not have trouble initially. Several researchers discussed this issue with US National Public Radio (NPR) noting that “difficult data”, a euphemism for graphically violent, hateful, and disturbing extremist and terrorist media content, “just kind of gets to you” and that researchers must find ways to manage the stress and negative impacts of their work (Allam, 2019).

Along with the emotional trauma of constant engagement with this type of violence, researchers may also be dealing with trauma, anxiety, and other mental and emotional difficulties associated with being (or fears of being) attacked by extremist actors and supporters online and on social media. Researchers have started reporting and organizing around their concerns about these types of effects ranging from the experience of anxiety and depression through specific trauma and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) type effects rooted in one or both potential fields – harassment and data immersion – of harm.²

Attitudes in the broader field of Extremism Studies research are starting to turn more favourably toward discussing and addressing these issues. However, much of the day-to-day response is still guided by attitudes from within the traditional array of disciplines at its core (Security Studies, Terrorism Studies, Political Science, International Relations, Criminology, War and Conflict Studies, etc.) which are historically male-dominated disciplines that have tended to downplay the effects of

²Examples include the REASSURE project, the EthEx Network, and the FRAN (formerly CARR) Ethics Research Unit. The Researcher Security, Safety and Resilience Project (REASSURE) is being conducted via interviews with researchers in the field, see: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/law/cytrec/projects/reassure/>. The EthEx Network is a researcher-organized group that seeks to explore and develop approaches to the ethical study of extremism (see @EthExNetwork), and early career women researchers (Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021) at The Far-Right Analysis Network (formerly Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right) developed a public-facing program and internal structure for developing best practices and safe research protocols for their member researchers.

mental and emotional harms. There can be a lingering sense that if a researcher is experiencing trauma, that they have trouble with the content, with harassment, etc., then it is a weakness or failing on their own part. Here, historically positivist frameworks for research can inform problematic notions that potentially blame researchers for their experiences of difficulty, suggesting that if a researcher is maintaining the correct objective stance toward their work, then content should not impact the researchers' emotions.

In relation to studying extremism specifically, these attitudes about perceived "weakness" are also communicated through masculinist rhetoric that repositions harassment as "marker of success". Moreover, they can be embedded in notions about how researchers should respond to harassment, whether to "fight" for their scholarship or "remain silent" to protect their image. For example, during my first experience of harassment online, other researchers whom I spoke with privately about the problem shared the sentiment that if I was being harassed by the "bad guys" on social media, it is because I must be doing "something right". The sentiment here, that being harassed is a badge of honour, or indicative of success, was (I am sure) shared with the intent of being helpful: as an effort to rhetorically minimize the harm. This, however, is problematic precisely because it trivializes the impact and the harm. Other researchers I spoke with split their advice among the two primary choices facing a target of harassment, "fight back", or don't "feed the trolls". Each response option creates distinct emotional experiences and labour for the target. If you fight back, you must drum up a network of support online to assist you (networked response) and you must stay engaged with the harmful posts and open yourself up to extended harassment. If you don't respond, the event might subside more quickly (it also might not), but you may feel silenced and isolated, alone and frustrated by not responding. Basically, there are no "good" answers and a decision about response must be a personal choice based on a researcher's individual situation, available support, and temperament.

While often meant to be helpful or supportive, such responses do not work broadly for researchers who are *always-already* targets in the online environment (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women, early career, and feminist scholars). Moreover, it displays a potential difference in the experience of gendered (or race, sexuality-based, etc.) threats for those bearing the targeted (marginalized) identity. Violent death, rape, or other threats of bodily (family) harm are more *real* for populations who have historically been targets of similar violence, especially because such violence is routinely ignored socially and under law. To date, if you report a credible online threat to police (or other institutional actors), the general framework of protection is for the target to remove themselves from being online, and if doxxed, to potentially have to leave their home until such time as it is "safe" to return. These steps do not stop harassment, nor do they prevent it in future. So, with lacking resources and guidance to address such harassment embedded in institutional, legal, and law enforcement practice, there is no real infrastructure for safety in a worst case scenario. The point here is that people with different identities and experiences will experience the harms and threats differently, and that is not addressed effectively through minimization of the problem as *modus operandi*.

What is missing from our engagement with these topics of study, phenomena, and populations in the digital context is an acknowledgement of digital space as the “real” world. If a scholar was sitting in front of a beheading in a community to research it, we would certainly recognize the potential for trauma alongside the potential for ethical problems and concerns. If bad actors were physically harassing a scholar outside a conference or on their campus, we would acknowledge that as a potential crime and the scholar as needing immediate and potentially ongoing support. Digital research *is* “real” world research. Digital interactions like threats, and harassment, *are* “real” world interactions with “real” consequences. Moreover, digital harassment is often networked such that multiple actors simultaneously attack targets over time and occurs on a substantially larger scale compared to instances of either dyadic online or typical offline harassment (Lewis et al., 2021). Problematically, the protocols applied in so-called “real world” (emplaced) contexts have not been fully developed for digital research, nor have the myriad of researchers conducting online research been trained in broadly agreed, standardized ethical and safety protocols for their work. Thus, the problem is multi-faceted, and protocols need further development including ethical frameworks for conducting responsible research (subject/community), for researcher safety (exposure to mass quantities of “difficult data”), and for researcher security online (planning for potential harassment, threats, and attacks).

3 Understanding Digital Research as Fieldwork

Digital research is not often viewed as “fieldwork”, instead the internet is viewed often as a “data source”. It is easier not to view digital textual research (e.g. online research not directly involving human subjects’ data gathering like interviews, focus groups, and surveys) as fieldwork or the internet as field site. That is in many ways a blinkered and ethically problematic view. As a field site, the digital environment is, essentially, a globally networked digital sphere of media and human interaction. It is a field site that crosses borders, has wildly different community guidelines, belief structures, and relational practices. It is also regularly a site of violence, a locus of danger toward scholars (particularly marginalized scholars), a bastion of anti-academic sentiment, and is incredibly fast-moving and ever-shifting territory. The nature of the digital as field site and internet research as fieldwork, however, poses its own unique demands and requirements in terms of ethical, methodological, and research design approaches (Fuchs, 2018; Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

When we shift our view from the internet as data source to the internet as a field site, several very urgent and important issues come into focus. The first issue is that it is people and communities that populate our field site, not (solely) “texts” or data. This is a point of ongoing discussion among scholars conducting internet research (Fuchs, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019) across a wide range of disciplines, but has yet to be resolved. Second is that the scope and scale of our field site is unimaginable in

an enplaced, person-to-person, research context. The vastness of the internet, and ever-increasing amount of content and users push research toward the use of computational (big data) methods in order to parse these materials at scale. Problematically, this can reinforce the notion of the internet as a data source through a series of processes that abstract the researcher away from the internet as a field site. Third (and stemming from the second) is that when we create corpuses of data from our field site, we are imposing form and structure that is not intrinsic to the communities or people who comprise our field site. Somewhat like the impacts of archiving and the power structures embedded in archival processes (Stoler, 2002), we must account for and be transparent about how and why we are selecting our sites of data capture, creating our corpuses, and the impacts that may have on the knowledge we are producing.

When the digital context is viewed as a field site, and digital research viewed as fieldwork, researcher and research subject safety must become a focus of our training for ethical and safe conduct of digital research. The protocols, standards, and norms must be adjusted for digital contexts and research that is not solely participant research. The digital context is the “real” world, but it reconfigures community, interpersonal, and interactional relations as well as power structures. The digital context also has a completely different scope and scale, it blurs traditional boundaries and often stymies clear distinctions. Not viewing the digital as a field site, however, *is* an ethical problem. Moreover, that problem will continue to grow especially with the in-progress shift to the metaverse where people will physically interact and engage in digital space.

4 The Utility of Reflexive Research Design

Reflexive Research Design (RRD) offers an approach to ethics in research through three aspects: (i) researcher transparency, (ii) acknowledgement of the researchers’ position in relation to the work, and (iii) articulating the stakes and wider impacts of their knowledge production (Patton, 2014). This approach incorporates deep introspection throughout the research process and foregrounds developing a robust research plan that accounts for the choices researchers make in their studies (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). Because it was developed through use in allied and public health, social work, and community-driven research, RRD inherently incorporates participant safety and ethics as part of its core concern. Adapting it to digital research contexts, particularly for settings and scholars most likely to experience harm (either harassment or data immersion), requires an equal focus on researcher safety and security protocols. However, this adaptation can be relatively simple given that RRD’s basic method of application is question-based. In the next sections, I show how researchers can develop RRD protocols for extremism research based on my own experiences as a researcher and my thinking about these topics (ethics, methodology, and method).

4.1 *Research Paradigms*

When thinking about how scholars conduct research, it is essential to parse the component parts of the research process, especially those that shape our inquiry and practices. This starts well before method or even question; it starts with our own individual, disciplinary, and scholarly worldviews. These worldviews make up the paradigms that guide and shape our research practice.

As a researcher and scholar, I am guided by two research paradigms, one that shapes my thought and approach in terms of ethical ways to conduct research and the other which shapes the way I structure my inquiry and analytical approaches. The first paradigm which shapes my approach to the ethical conduct of research, and therefore is the most applicable to this discussion, is drawn from decolonial methodology. While the paradigm that structures my inquiry and analytical approaches is drawn from Intersectional Feminist Theory. Both decolonial methodology and intersectional theory have strong basic commitments to uncovering tensions between structural power and individual experience and addressing the ways that power structures relationships and locates people with specific material, and differential effects (Smith, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991; Berger & Guidroz, 2009). This aligns well with an RRD approach as it necessitates researcher reflexivity in relation to their work, seeks to highlight the ways researchers' practices shape knowledge production (a form of structural power), and normalizes researcher transparency by incorporating introspection on the researcher's position, role, and choices into publications and research practices (Attia & Edge, 2017; Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021).

There is, however, a disjuncture between the tenets of decolonizing methods or intersectional analysis and their application to methods for studying far-right (white and male supremacist) extremism online. How could I conduct participatory research with violent actors who identify me as a threat? Or treat privileged cultures espousing victimhood and promoting hate as reliable interlocutors (even in their digital texts)? I decided that I did not want to do either. So, applying decolonial or intersectional insights and practices to the digital contexts I study necessitates shifting from methods or the methodological to the paradigmatic (McCall, 2005). That is, making the foundational goals of decolonial methodologies and intersectional thinking into guiding principles that shape research design and study questions. This shift from methodology to paradigm can be made regardless of the methodological stance, but disjuncture between our research paradigms and our research concerns point to the need for and utility of a reflexive approach to research design.

Getting to this paradigmatic approach requires me to continually think about my goals with each project, my practices and whether they amplify hate or critique power, my commitments to promoting equality and how those shape or are shaped by each project. For example, in writing about White women extremist influencers who argue a return to femininity is liberatory (thus we should embrace authoritarian patriarchy), how do I show they are agentic actors, choosing to support hate and embrace the benefits of white privilege, but not legitimize their claims? Moreover, how do I deemphasize the tendency to better reward White women scholars (like

myself) studying racial topics? My methods-based choice here is to utilize Black Feminist and Intersectional theory as my framework for critical analysis, to cite the many Black women scholars who have written about this work (hopefully expanding the canon of Extremism studies), and highlight the necessity of exploring White women's use of femininity as a racialized weapon. In this way, reflexivity (RRD) can be utilized to better understand how your commitments, principles, ethics, and training shape your research choices so that they become proactive rather than passive.

4.2 *Methods and Transparency*

Positional reflexivity in research aims at acknowledging the researcher's role in the production of knowledge and providing transparency about the ways that researcher's own positions (biases, experiences, etc.) shape the research itself (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). As a critical, cultural humanities scholar, I typically conduct qualitative research on extremist digital cultures and communicative practices gathering data and compiling datasets manually from websites and social media. I find my data sources through web searches, news stories, and often through outlinked sources on previously identified sites or social media posts. Once the data are compiled, I conducted grounded interpretive analysis of textual coding, thematic identification, and contextual mapping through text, image, video, and cultural analysis.

My approach to this research is inquiry-driven such that my larger scholarly questions drive my selection of research topic, methods, and data. These larger questions are themselves driven by my personal experience, my social position and background, as well as by my individual interests. Clearly locating myself in my research and how my identity shapes my choices provides transparency in the research and knowledge production process. It helps me to situate my work in relation to power through an iterative process meant to uncover and address potential biases and blind spots (Rich, 1996). It also offers a mechanism to decentralize the notion of research as neutral where researcher choices, influences on research, and bias are obscured by abstractions that Donna Haraway (1988) refers to as the "god trick".

For example, my scholarly interest in exploring and understanding how gendered discourses are used to reproduce racial power structures and violence is rooted in my identity, experience, and privilege as a White woman raised in the middle class in the United States who is committed to promoting social equality and equity. As a White feminist scholar, I could study race by focusing on phenomena, practices, and cultures of people of colour. Many White feminist scholars have done this and been very successful. Arguably, those same scholars have benefited from communities and cultures of colour where Black feminist and other scholars of colour remain underrepresented and less valued for the same type of research. In working closely with Black feminist scholarship, I became increasingly committed both to working against White supremacy and the privileging of White women scholars work on

“race” in the academy. This shaped my choice to focus on whiteness as a racial category and explore how whiteness intersects with other power structures (patriarchy, citizenship, sexuality, etc.) as the basis of my research. These larger choices about my commitments act as the foundation for locating myself in my work along with specific project by project choices.

This commitment to the study of whiteness at its intersections with other structures of power (my research paradigm of intersectionality) can be seen in my research into how discourses about motherhood are used by women to negotiate for power within public and political contexts and how this access to power is differentially available based on other intersecting structures (race, class, citizenship, etc.).³ My selection of the topic of motherhood and my hypothesis that discourses of motherhood are used to engage socio-cultural, political, and economic power stems specifically from my own experience as a middle-class White woman who has chosen not to have children, and my subsequent (ongoing) experiences with being verbally, and often emotionally disciplined by other women either encouraging me to become a mother or judging me for not being a mother. This experience leads me to the understanding that discursive practices around mothering and motherhood are a gendered form of communicating and negotiating with and for power in patriarchal cultures. This insight drawn from my identity and experience thus shaped my research inquiry and my selection of topics which then shaped my choice in methods (intersectional analysis) and data (women’s blogs, posts, and media discussing motherhood).

4.3 Trying Operationalize Reflexivity Through Paradigm and Method

In attempting to adapt decolonial methods (as paradigm) to this research, broadly speaking, I became aware of several problems. First, the way digital interactions and social work position digital research – even primarily text-based research – as enmeshed within a digital culture (community). This means digital context blurs any delineation of participant or non-participant research. Second, scholars performing digital research create their own constellations and corpuses of texts, often bringing disparate content together in a variety of ways that they are not connected in the research environment, and this should be made transparent in the outcomes (Stoler, 2002). Third, I was studying potentially “dangerous” subjects (hate speech/propaganda/extremist ideology) and given the cultures’ extreme misogyny and anti-feminism, regularly and specifically targeting their ire at female academics, my identity as a White woman who is both a feminist, and a scholar studying extremism, and who supports gender, race, and sexuality-based equality made me part of a specific category of the targeted outgroup. There is in fact a special hatred of White

³For a more detailed description of this see Mattheis (2021a, b).

female “race-traitors” as I would be categorized among the groups I study online. This situation made several ethical questions extremely urgent (which I discuss further in the next section).

In conducting grounded, interpretive analysis of texts, I didn’t experience the same type of immediate ethical concern. That does not, however, mean there are no potential concerns with methods that can benefit from reflexivity. Using a grounded approach without some measure of reflexivity can make research choices less clear for readers of the findings. Ideally when using a grounded methodological approach, the researcher should be open to the text itself and be flexible toward changes that may arise throughout the research process. Transparency about choices made in including or excluding data is necessary in this approach. Why does the data matter or not matter to the study at hand? What is the framework for including or excluding it? Here, rather than excluding “outliers” which may not fit an imposed model, or casting them in light of an imposed model, outlier data can become a point of interest in the interpretation. Why does the data seem out of place? How does the outlier “fit” within the discursive or rhetorical construction? Does it highlight something specific or signal a shift in the discourse?

For the benefits of reflexivity as an ethical approach to be fully realized, the researcher may need to do additional introspective work such as keeping a research journal with a reflexive focus to allow them to clarify how they are analysing the data. If choices are not explicated in the text, they may seem as if they are part of the data. Conversely, when using a specific model or framework to conduct data analysis, it can be simpler to describe the choices associated with the chosen method, but more difficult to describe one’s relationship to the research. Essentially, the ease of description may provide a “way out” for researchers in terms of self-positioning in publication. So, for researchers to provide transparency when not applying grounded approaches, using reflexivity can be a technique to help clarify their role and choices in terms of modelling and data analysis.

Operationalizing reflexivity is a project- and research-specific process, although in non-digital contexts, standards and protocols are more concretely available as parameters as a foundation for the endeavour. The wide array of disciplinary perspectives and multiple orientations to methods (quantitative, qualitative, computational, manual, and mixed methods) embedded in digital research increases the complexity of generating standardized training and protocols for the ethical conduct of research online. Moreover, the unique features of internet research as fieldwork and the digital as field site, particularly increasing concerns over researcher safety and security online, necessitate an immediately applicable framework to mitigate harms while the field works to create effective standards and protocols. In the next section, I outline some of the tensions between traditional concerns over research ethics and the problematic of researcher safety and security online to make clear the urgency of the issue.

5 Balancing Ethical and Emotional Demands

Balancing the ethics of research with the ethics of researcher safety and security online is an essential facet of conducting ethical digital research and one that is magnified when working with dangerous topics and difficult data. As noted in the prior section, this type of balance can be difficult to achieve especially because there are not yet standardized approaches and protocols aimed at addressing these ethical concerns, nor at creating ethical balance. In the rest of this section, I highlight these tensions by providing a brief discussion of my experience in developing my own individualized approach to provide insight that spurs discussion and debate (rather than suggest or impose any specific techniques or best practices).

While attempting to adapt and apply the ethical frame from my decolonial paradigm combined with using grounded, interpretive methods for my work on digital extremist cultures from the manosphere, Alt-Right, far-right, and far-right-adjacent cultures made several ethical questions increasingly urgent: Was I willing to interact with participants in these digital cultures? Was it safe to do so given that ethical research means making yourself known to participants and providing/gaining informed consent? While my paradigmatic commitments involve reduction of harm for participants, participant engagement in the research process, conducting non-extractive research, etc. How was I to reconcile these commitments with the potential risks? Furthermore, as I began experiencing online harassment in relation to publicized research presentations and comments given to news reporters, I began to experience new anxieties and stresses, with limited available institutional support or awareness on my campus. How was I to conduct my research ethically, stay safe mentally and emotionally, and learn to manage the ongoing threat of abuse?

The first question about the ethical conduct of participant research with extremist groups and actors is not an impossible problem as excellent participant research has been done with extremists and violent actors (e.g. Blee, 2002; Pearson, 2019). However, that work is predominantly done in non-digital contexts meaning that by design the project itself required interaction, informed consent, and other specific ethical stipulations and standards. Was I as a researcher willing to do that? Was I willing to contact extremists and participants in web cultures openly targeting feminists and women researchers, essentially people like me? Was I willing to use my methodological commitments of participatory research and engagement regarding publications with a group hostile to my research approach? Did I feel safe contacting people calling for violence and abuse of people like me to tell them about my work, give them access to my contact information, and essentially make myself their target? Ultimately, my decision was that I was not willing to conduct research that required informed consent with a group who targets my identity (Fuchs, 2018). My decision was rooted in my work on male supremacist groups from the manosphere (Men's Rights Activists, Men Going their Own Way, Pick Up Artists, and Incels) who expressly target feminist women and researchers for harassment and who regularly promote violence against women as a solution to their perceived problems (Carian et al., 2022). This meant that I needed to create a framework for

myself for being reflexive about which data (images, texts, messages, blog posts, videos, etc.) I considered “public” data. In every project I conduct, a general set of questions must be adapted. It also means that I tend to focus on the messaging of well-known, public personalities in the movements, and responses to their content (Fuchs, 2018; Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

It is especially important to be reflexive about how we are selecting “data” in digital contexts because working on digital “texts” or “data” can be a grey area that does not technically require any interaction or consent (Fuchs, 2018; Rambukkana, 2019). This is easily seen in research choices made by digital researchers. A primary example of this grey area and how it is navigated in terms of ethics is the choice of which platforms to research. There are multiple factors that impact platform choice, some dependent on whether large volume data are needed (e.g. for computational analyses vs small scale analyses) and how easy the data are to access (e.g. is there an application programming interface, API, for automating data gathering), others are more related to topical concern such as which user bases prefer the platform or which topics are mainstays of the platform (e.g. a study of teenage dance videos would favour TikTok rather than Instagram). However, a primary factor applicable to all types of digital research, and which impacts this discussion, is whether the platform or area of the platform is public or private (Fuchs, 2018).

The question of public or private content is primarily a question of the ethics of informed consent. This discussion, in particular, is explicated in methodological texts on conducting what has been called “netnography” (Kozinets, 2015), or digital ethnographic methods. Is watching a group chat or an ongoing online conversation thread “lurking” in a community and does it require that you message the group to provide informed consent? What if the group is technically public, but it is clear from the chat that the participants believe it to be a relatively closed conversation among their group? The result over time for digital researchers not working expressly with participants is to focus their research on clearly public platform content. Twitter, for example, is considered “public” because of the way the platform is structured. However, what is considered public on Facebook (now Meta) is much less clear. Private channels on platforms like Telegram are clearly not public, but might allow joinlinks to be shared, indicating that the privacy is not fully vetted, again muddying the waters. Ultimately, each researcher using ethical review must decide which parameters are ethically acceptable, but the point is simple: it’s just not that easy from an ethical perspective to consider human communication in digital space “only data.”

This set of ethical concerns also had to be balanced with ethical questions about my safety and security as a researcher including harassment (as mentioned above) and in relation to my data. The required level of engagement and immersion with hateful content can be particularly problematic when researching hate, extremism/terrorism, violence, trauma, and other so-called “dangerous” topics. Moreover, such difficulty can be magnified when the researcher comes from a “targeted” identity group. It is critically important that we begin to integrate the insights articulated about emotional labour and experiences of research trauma from marginalized scholars at different intersections of race, sexuality, ability, age, and class

(etc.) as well as gender (Pearson, 2023). Especially salient to this discussion for our field are any discussions about the differential forms of trauma and processes of managing impact and building resistance by women scholars of colour, LGBTQ+, Jewish, and Muslim scholars.

The form my research takes – inquiry-driven, manual, and grounded – means that I am deeply engaged for long periods of time with the data I am analysing. Often, I am immersed in the content and the context (e.g. websites, blogs, social media channels) throughout my data-gathering and analysis phases. When my data include video materials, I may also have to transcribe extremist speeches or video commentary to code and analyse it alongside the visual imagery. In my initial work on hate content online, I had learned over the course of my first long-term project that I needed to structure my time looking at data and sourcing data with built-in gaps in exposure. I decided to limit my time “down the rabbit hole” to three consecutive days then I took enforced breaks, usually at least 1–2 days minimum away from looking at content (a well-being practice I still use). This helped with the stress levels and with trauma, specifically a type of cognitive dissonance that can occur when being immersed in highly persuasive (rhetorically speaking) content that you disagree with ideologically.

My identity also increased my stress related to reading the hateful material that positioned people like me (women, feminists) as subhuman, underserving of basic rights and civil liberties, and as objects deserving of men’s violence (including rape and death) as a corrective. Moreover, staying immersed in that type of content in the socio-cultural context of its production can increase your anxiety levels in relation to everyday living. I wasn’t reading hateful and violent content posted by abstract extremists in some other part of the world, these could easily be men in my own neighbourhood, on my campus (there had been flyers posted for some of these groups), or other local people in my own community. So, clearing my head regularly helped me to be able to maintain more trust in strangers around me. I also had a very clear period when I noticed an increased sense of trauma. It was specifically after I moved away from working on manosphere groups (gendered hate online) to working on women’s messaging for Far-Right groups, then tried to return to work on the manosphere content. It was much more difficult going back and immersing myself in that content.

I realized that the difficulty I was having was a combination of two factors: (1) my experience of the framing in men’s narratives as explicitly harsher than in the women’s narratives in term of the language used and (2) the longer period that I had been exposed to the content, after several additional years. In terms of the harshness problem, in my early projects focused on manosphere groups, I had developed a sort of emotional callous, a psychic barrier toward the language which had gradually eroded when I wasn’t regularly looking at/listening to that content. It is important to note that extremist women’s rhetoric is no less hateful or even violent than the men’s rhetoric, especially toward feminist women and researchers, rather the language and framing the women use are generally more subtle and less directly misogynistic. In addition, the women tend to make general calls for harm, whereas the men’s narratives tend to be much more specific and individualized, displaying a

potentially actionable desire to commit the harms against women themselves. In terms of the exposure problem, I find that the longer I spend reading, seeing, hearing the same claims wrapped in different packaging, they become substantially less novel (from a research perspective) and therefore less interesting. Here, I often have to combat the feeling that what I am seeing is just the same old thing again. It matters that the same old narrative is used in new places, or different contexts. But it can be exhausting to hear the same *hateful* ideas, narratives, and rhetoric, or see the same images repetitively. The primary thing these two problems force a researcher to work against is lessening your analytic engagement as a response to discomfort or ennui in light of exposure to difficult data.

In response, my set of reflexive, ethical questions grew to incorporate my online safety and security concerns as well as decision-making about how I would deal with difficult content, how much time I needed to complete projects or in between projects, and widened out to begin to assess how I would potentially address harm or trauma and what might be “points of no return”, or how I would know if I needed to leave this research for a time or leave it permanently. For me, the answer was if the materials ever stopped affecting me, that is if I ever start to become numb or apathetic to the hate and violence, then I need to stop. In terms of dealing with trauma, I have to check in with myself regularly while working on the project and plan with longer time frames in case I need to take breaks. I also regularly check in with my closest colleagues in this work as we share our experiences and talk things out together. And, I plan to embed funding for trauma counselling into grant proposals to provide access to that support for myself, as well as any collaborators or assistants on the project. Crucially, I have learned all of this through experience. None of this was covered in my ethical or methodological training, nor at the time was it being openly discussed yet in the field. In response, I began to make ethics with a focus on institutional responsibility for researcher safety online another strand of my research program (See: Mattheis & Kingdon, 2021).⁴

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

This chapter has moved between theory and example in the above sections. In this concluding discussion, I provide a narrative reflection in two parts. First an example of how RRD works using one of my prior projects. Second is an example of decision making using RRD in relation to my experience with online harassment and online safety.

⁴For a detailed description, see Mattheis and Kingdon (2021).

6.1 *Reflecting on Shieldmaidens*

To think reflexively about how to structure a project is often something we engage in (at least in part) as we design our projects, but may not be something we think about explicitly. It can help to look at prior projects and see if we can “uncover” the choices we made and reflect on why we made them as a practice for starting to use RRD going forward. Here is a brief example of what this looks like for one of my projects, published in “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness: (Alt)Maternalism and Women Recruiting for the Far/Alt-Right”. In the project, I explored how gendered discourses are employed by far-right extremist women to radicalize other women.⁵ To examine such a question, I began with a news story about far-right women complaining about sexism in their online interactions. I located materials produced by the women mentioned in the article, well-known influencers with public materials on public platforms. I sourced their texts and media, as well as collected response and secondary texts about the primary documents and subjects. I employed manual data collection methods, in this example, sourcing YouTube propaganda videos, online blog texts, streaming radio episodes, and secondary source information from social media and news platforms. Last, I conducted interpretive analysis using a grounded approach (allowing themes to emerge from the text itself) to understand how extremist narratives and ideology are framed via gendered discourses, ultimately taking a critical approach to how such propaganda and messaging impact and influence digital and offline socio-political life and culture.⁶

All of these choices are shaped to some extent by my identity and experience. My understanding of the data and relationship to the arguments made by White identitarian women is impacted by my whiteness, my age, my experiences, and importantly my training in critical, particularly Black feminist literatures. As such, thinking through why I am making specific selections (e.g. analytic and ethical choices, including primary and secondary text selection, quotation and citation of primary materials, data sources) and the potential impacts they have on the results helps to ensure that my research is conducted more ethically through transparency and iterative reflection and introspection throughout the research process. As noted above, my choice to study whiteness and the use of gendered discourses to promote racial hatred stems from my commitments both to social equity and to studying intersectionality and race while also reducing unearned professional privilege based on my own whiteness. My choice to examine the public texts and media of well-known influencers on public platforms is driven by my concerns over the often-ambiguous ethics of digital community research (noted above).

In this project, I chose to use a grounded methodological approach and interpretive methods because these assist with ensuring that empirical assessment of the materials and can also be more transparent. This is because through a grounded

⁵For a more detailed description of this see: Mattheis (2018).

⁶Grounded methods are not solely used in the context of manual data collection, they are also used at scale in some computational approaches to qualitative analysis.

interpretive approach, the researcher interprets themes, narratives, discourses, symbols, and topics as they emerge from the text rather than applying pre-existing analytical models (Charmaz, 2006). Qualitative coding, where used, is also determined from within the content of the texts or corpus. So, to continue with my example, the primary gendered themes making up what I termed the “discursive composite” of the recruiting narrative focused on extremist presentations of White motherhood, White hetero-normative romance, and violence against White women. These themes were drawn directly from the text of a prominent far-right woman’s speech through textual coding and then interpreted through Communication and Intersectional theory to understand how they worked together to create a cohesive whole. Using a grounded approach, then, enabled me to assess the content I am analysing on its own terms (that is in the terms of the speaker in their context and within the terms of the discourses and symbols applied). The approach also allowed me to be reflexive in relation to my interpretation, checking it against what is empirically extant in the texts to advance my claims. Here, I could ensure that I was fairly representing the text in its context and utilizing historical and contextual secondary sources to strengthen my interpretive claims.

6.2 Reflecting on Harassment and Safety

When I experienced my first – admittedly mild – harassment event, I did not turn to my institution. I spoke to a supportive faculty member who reminded me to catalogue everything, but not to get too upset by it. To limit my increasing anxiety, I muted my mentions and restricted myself to search once a day for things that I would need to notify the police or my institution about. By day 2, the harassment started drawing from my larger body of work. I received a message stating that one of my articles had been read and downloaded on another platform nearly 1000 times in under 24 hours. I checked the site only to find that all the engagements were from non-platform users because someone had linked my article to a tweet in the harassment thread. The harshest attacks centred on a cover image (selected by the blog publisher) for a third piece, a short research blog post, that was then used as “proof” of my “flawed” research. The publisher and centre I wrote the piece for were mentioned in the posts, so I waited for them to respond or reach out to me but heard nothing. Eventually, I contacted the research centre director – my first time speaking directly with him – to let him know about it. He was personally supportive, but there were no institutional guidelines or support for dealing with harassment there either. I felt completely isolated. Harassment campaigns like this one can often become what I call “zombie” harassment because every so often someone will dig up the tweets and retweet them starting the whole thing over again, though not as intensely or for an extended period of time. There have also been several things published about me stemming from this incident, one supposedly academic and one on a fairly difficult to find extremist website. I still check every so often to see if new mentions

can be found on the web, but I don't look for it on the larger extremist sites or social media platforms used heavily by extremists.

In dealing with online safety and attempting to prevent harassment, it is important to understand that you cannot make yourself completely safe. You can take steps to limit your online presence and lock or delete your social media accounts, but this has several effects. First, if you are publishing or doing any public work (conferences, presentations, etc.), bad actors may post about you anyway and may take the time to find whatever information they can; it is almost impossible to remove your entire digital presence and history. Second, if you do not engage in digital spaces to promote your work (social media, websites, university notices, etc.), you will likely suffer in the contemporary professional information and networking marketplace. It is beneficial to reflect on your personal needs. Here you might think about your capacity for dealing with difficult data and whether you can access trauma counselling if needed. Create a plan for how you might respond to harassment and put together an operational security plan (will you use a VPN, burner laptop/phone, how often will you scrub your online footprint, who do you contact in case of harassment), and think about where you can get support. These answers may change over time, or you might find that your plan simply goes awry and, in the moment, you need something different. Importantly, many of these supports are not provided by institutions; very few institutions actually recognize these problems as research ethics issues. This is why my focus in relation to researcher safety online has been on institutional responsibility as I believe promoting awareness and creating institutional and disciplinary support frameworks will help drive better, safer research.⁷

Ultimately, there is an increasing focus on these issues and concerns as evidenced by this book among others. Empirical work is being conducted to better understand researchers' experiences in the field of Extremism Studies and reflexive frameworks for ethics in Extremism research and Internet research more broadly are being created and published.⁸ There is also recent work discussing these same topics within formal disciplines, such as my own discipline of Communication, which relates to studying extremism online.⁹ Rethinking the digital as a field site for all types of online methods and incorporating RRD as an approach to ethical and safe digital research can move this project forward for Extremism Studies.

⁷See Mattheis and Kingdon (2021).

⁸See (1) REASSURE Project (Pearson et al., 2023), (2) The Framework for Ethical Research in Terrorism Studies (FRETS) by Morrison et al. (2021); (3) Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) Internet Research Ethics guide is a multi-part guide that has been developed over time to support ethical internet research, specifically AOIR 3.0 (franzke et al., 2020); (4) "Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics" (Townsend & Wallace, 2016); and (5) Fuchs (2018).

⁹See Rambukkana (2019).

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Chapter 32

Conclusions: Deciphering the Unspoken: A Collective Examination of Sensitive Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security Studies



Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández , Cristina Del-Real , and Lorena Molnar 

Preceding these conclusions are the experiences of 55 researchers from 40 Universities and research centers across four continents. These scholars have accumulated a collective experience of over 700 years in fieldwork, starting as early as the 1980s. Rather than a mere compilation of authors' experiences, we aimed to undertake a comprehensive analysis of their research endeavors, extracting valuable lessons to enhance criminology and security studies in sensitive areas. The extensive review of chapters revealed both commonalities and unique aspects among the research projects.

Throughout this book, one of our central objectives was to shed light on fieldwork experiences often overlooked in scientific discussions, confined to limited circles of colleagues. Researchers may hesitate to share such experiences due to a sense of embarrassment or the perception that they hold little value or relevance to others' projects. However, these fieldwork experiences serve as practical demonstrations of how methodological decisions intersect with reality in the field, frequently extending beyond the boundaries defined by research ethics committees.

The subsequent sections delve into the diverse approaches employed by the authors of this collective book to access their sensitive samples, encompassing both shared and distinct methodologies. We explore the methodological and ethical considerations that arose throughout the different phases of their studies: before, during, and after the research endeavors. To maintain coherence, we adhered closely to the structure proposed to the authors for drafting these conclusions.

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1 Field Preparation

Proper preparation is vital for successful fieldwork, as an initial misstep can obstruct future strategies. This book's authors have used various methods to understand the territories they explored, from consulting experts and conducting literature reviews to gaining insights from Internet forums. A researcher may develop a protocol outlining the target population, potential data sources, and risks to mitigate. In some instances, researchers are obliged to submit their protocol to research ethics committees (in continental European terms), also known by the name *Institutional Review Boards* (IRBs). While some institutions enforce stringent IRB oversight, others do not. Notably, two-thirds of the research in this book did not seek prior IRB consultation. As noted by Carthy and Schuurman, IRBs require ethical data-gathering and minimal risk to participants or researchers. However, their suggestions may not align with the field approach. For instance, despite an ethics committee's advice, Menih chose casual attire to blend in. Sometimes, committees proposed different rules based on the project funding agency. Even without formal structures, researchers still acted responsibly. Most adhered to ethical standards they deemed fit, even if unconventional. Others faced unique risks, such as those in cyberspace research (such as Moneva and colleagues), requiring additional security measures to avoid potential cyber-attacks, ensure secure data collection and storage, maintain legal compliance, and meet audit requirements.

The preparatory phase for field access is often hindered by the presence of ambiguity and a lack of clarity regarding the specific object of study. This challenge arises due to the limited research or recent emergence of certain phenomena. Carthy and Schuurman emphasize the distinction between studying "extremism" and "terrorism," highlighting the need for careful consideration in approaching the field and engaging with participants. Similarly, Gassó and Gómez-Durán discuss the difficulty of studying sexting without a clear definition for the phenomenon. Bliesemann de Guevara and Macaspac recognize the complexity, volatility, and mutability of the field, particularly in violent contexts where territorial control shifts between guerrilla groups and the State. In the realm of cyberspace, defining the field itself requires substantial reflection that is still an ongoing process. Mattheis asserts that the Internet serves as their fieldwork domain, challenging the perception that it is merely a "data source."

Moneva and colleagues stress the importance of early conceptualization, as in their case, for instance, hacktivism differs from cybercriminal activities. When approaching the field, there are factors that extend beyond the novelty or elusiveness of the subject matter. The researcher's perspective can potentially distort the phenomenon under investigation. For example, Atkinson-Sheppard reflects on her understanding of Bangladeshi street children, realizing that conceptualizing them as "illicit laborers" rather than offenders or mere victims was a more appropriate research approach. She acknowledges that emotional constraints influenced her perception, preventing her from recognizing the children's involvement in criminal groups, the existing hierarchies among them, and the necessity for street children to work for

survival. Atkinson-Sheppard's emotional reflections led her to recognize her inclination to view children, especially vulnerable ones, as innocent and in need of protection – a perspective shaped by Global North conceptualizations of children and childhood. This recognition poses limitations when approaching the phenomenon or object of study, as it influences the choice of techniques and necessitates reflection on the emotional aspects related to the researcher's positionality in the field.

While the objects of study in this book vary, there are notable similarities in the approach strategies employed by the authors. The most common approach typically involves conducting preliminary documentation work, albeit limited due to the understudied nature of some of the topics, and then deciding on a specific day to initiate contact by knocking on a gatekeeper's door that has been identified during the documentation period. For instance, Del-Real and van Steen emphasize the significance of demonstrating extensive knowledge about cybersecurity issues prior to initiating contact with the participants. However, on other occasions access occurs more gradually, so perhaps it would be more appropriate to understand access as a process and not as a single moment. This approach is what Feixa applied in his work with gangs. His experience over the decades that he has researched this phenomenon is that entry into the field has never occurred all at once, but rather is a continuous process of entries and exits that, in the end – and perhaps this is one of the central elements of his reflection – is a process of adaptation to the particularities of the group under study.

The scientific literature highlights the significance of gatekeepers as the most apparent entry point into the field. Among the authors, their typology has exhibited considerable diversity, although they unanimously recognize their crucial role as the gateway. One recurring reflection revolves around the question of whether "official" gatekeepers such as social workers, police officers, or probation officers, who are often considered formal representatives of the state, are an encouraging or dissuading factor for vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups' participation in a study. Menih provides an interesting insight to this doubt. Despite initial reservations, she discovered that women experiencing homelessness, although vulnerable, had established trusting relationships with formal state organizations. A similar situation unfolded in Molnar's study on sex workers, where social workers played a facilitating role in initiating the recruitment process. Prado's case also demonstrates how social workers served as gatekeepers for accessing immigrant minors. The notion of what constitutes a formal structure may vary across countries and can encompass entities like the Men's Behaviour Change Program, which offers group therapy and other forms of treatment for men involved in domestic and family violence (Boxall and colleagues). Additionally, in the study by Borges and Faria, entities involved in the Portuguese shelter system acted as gatekeepers.

The vital role of gatekeepers also applies to the study of state elites, as highlighted by Collier and Alcántara in relation to political elites, Diamint and Martínez in the case of military and political elites, Burkhardt and Boivin who accessed police officers. Due to their significance, the authors emphasize the importance of identifying the specific gatekeepers needed, as the individual who can open doors within one political group may not necessarily have the same influence with another.

In highly formalized organizations such as political parties, parliaments, armed forces, prisons, law enforcement agencies, or intelligence services, the gatekeeper's role extends beyond facilitating access to also authorizing it. Even if alternative means of access to the field exist, consulting with gatekeepers as a matter of course becomes necessary to prevent potential obstacles later on. Díaz, for example, took preventive measures by presenting his study to the Spanish intelligence services, even though they did not collaborate in it. Similarly, Balcells and Tamarit encountered an unfruitful response when approaching the Catholic Church through official channels, but they recognized the obligation to attempt this avenue before exploring other options.

In situations where potential participants are located – and even *constricted* – within public institutions where access is restricted, the role of the gatekeeper becomes indispensable. This is evident in the experiences of researchers like Halty, who gained access to prisons and centers housing criminal psychopaths or minors with significant behavioral issues, and Prado, who accessed migrant minors through the institutions where they were detained. In such cases, contact and authorization to access these individuals can only be obtained through these official gatekeepers. It is not always a requirement for individuals to be institutionalized; they may simply be in a situation where contact and access are only possible through these gatekeepers. This was the case for researchers like Lambelet and colleagues, who accessed probationers, and Ingrascì, who interacted with Mafia informants (*pentiti*). It is important to note that access facilitated by the state may not always involve individuals directly, but can also pertain to accessing documentation or archives. In the latter case, the experiences shared in this volume illustrate that access is often conditioned by factors such as the need to maintain confidentiality or ensuring there is sufficient staff available to anonymize and assist researchers. These considerations regarding archives highlight the additional complexities researchers may encounter when seeking access to historical or sensitive documents, requiring careful management of privacy and security concerns.

There are also a number of less common gatekeepers, but whose role has been essential as well. In Turner's case, his gatekeeper was a friend “who had an events company linked to Electronic Dance Music, [who] proved to be essential lion during fieldwork, gaining access to super-club guest lists that would otherwise have been of limits with ticket prices around 80–100 euros,” while in Feixa's case, throughout his long career working with gangs, his access points have been numerous: street educators, priests who had worked with boy scouts, a punk music researcher, the director of a youth house, and a rapper. In the case of Vallés' study of the Roma, the gatekeepers were respected members of the community, while Güerri and Martí's study would not have been possible without a gang leader inside a Salvadoran prison. In secret, dangerous environments or where participants are difficult to identify – such as in Carthy's or Díaz's case – the gatekeeper may be a former member of the IRA terrorist group whom a colleague introduced via email, or a former Spanish intelligence agent and a former Minister of Defense, respectively.

In certain situations, gaining access to the field may require navigating through multiple successive gatekeepers. Güerri and Martí highlight the significance of

explaining and persuading each gatekeeper, recognizing their distinct roles, and employing different approaches for each one. In the same vein, Del-Real and van Steen acknowledge the complexities associated with researching diverse categories of cybersecurity professionals, ranging from hackers to police officers, necessitating the adaptation of their access strategies to suit the distinct characteristics inherent in these heterogeneous cohorts of participants. The access process plays a crucial role in determining the level of freedom and flexibility researchers will ultimately have in conducting their investigation. It influences factors such as where access is granted, the types of participants available for study, or which files can be reviewed. As Güerri and Martí emphasize, it involves an ongoing negotiation process with the field, from obtaining central authorization to engaging with the facility's management and officials responsible for granting access to specific inmates. Within this negotiation process, there is ample room for renegotiating the researcher's presence in the field, which can have positive or negative implications.

However, despite thorough preparatory work and strategic efforts, there are instances where these endeavors may not yield the desired outcome. Refusals to grant access to the field can take various forms, such as citing an inconvenient timing, the need for further consultation, deeming the research topic irrelevant, raising security concerns, or simply maintaining silence. In such instances, researchers may encounter significant obstacles that impede their progress. In situations where access is blocked, as observed by Diamint and Martínez, alternative approaches may need to be considered. For example, seeking access through higher-level authorities, such as government ministers, may present a potential avenue to overcome initial refusals. This tactic has proven successful for these researchers in gaining entry to their respective fields of study. Alternatively, researchers may opt to exercise patience, allowing time to facilitate the removal of obstacles and pave the way for eventual access. In studying cybercriminals, Moneva and colleagues propose an interesting idea that warrants further exploration in the future. They bring up the possibility of adopting the role of buyers within illicit markets as a means of gaining entry. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that such an approach carries significant ethical implications that must be thoroughly assessed and considered. Ultimately, while preparation and planning are crucial components of successful fieldwork, the role of luck should not be disregarded. Serendipitous circumstances or unforeseen opportunities may arise, enabling access that was not initially anticipated. While luck alone cannot be relied upon as a sole strategy, researchers should remain open to its potential influence when navigating the complexities of fieldwork.

In situations where direct engagement with participants is neither possible nor advisable due to safety concerns, researchers must resort to indirect approaches. Ingrascì, for example, faced the challenge of studying dangerous groups like the Cosa Nostra in Sicily and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria. In such cases, the most feasible approach involved engaging with local communities to gather information and insights about the phenomenon rather than attempting direct contact with the mafia themselves. While the obtained insights may not be firsthand, alternative sources such as transcribed conversations from police eavesdropping can provide valuable

glimpses into the inner workings of these organizations, even if they cannot be considered strictly as “authentic natural settings.”

2 Methods

2.1 Sampling Techniques

The composition and size of the populations under study have posed significant challenges for the authors in this book. Various factors make these populations hard-to-reach, resulting in difficulties in determining their size and composition. Secrecy plays a role in intelligence services as in the study of Díaz, while individuals who have endured human trafficking may be wary of self-identifying due to fear like in the research of Brunovskis and Surtees. In the digital world, individuals involved in illegal activities or cyberbullying may be difficult to identify, as pointed out by Vandebosch and Pabian, and some groups, such as the *pentiti* described by Ingrascì, may be extremely small and hidden. Ingrascì’s research, for instance, sometimes focused on a single individual, such as the only female *pentito* or the only lawyer charged with mafia association who decided to collaborate with the state. In the case of parliamentary elites studied by Coller and Alcántara, military elites researched by Diamint and Martínez, or cybersecurity professionals contacted by Del-Real and van Steen, identification is relatively straightforward, but reaching and obtaining their participation presents challenges.

To address the difficulty of understanding the dimensions and composition of these populations, researchers have made different decisions. In cases where obtaining a list of individuals and designing a probabilistic sampling is not feasible, researchers propose alternative approaches. Güerri and Martí suggest selecting one out of every five inmates in each prison module when it is not possible to obtain comprehensive inmate data for sample design. However, in many cases, the sample is determined by the institution itself, making it difficult to assess representativeness and potential bias. The sample may unintentionally represent only novice offenders and fail to include more experienced individuals or those who have not yet been identified or apprehended. Ingrascì encountered a similar issue with repentant mafia members. This is a general challenge that can be mitigated through triangulation, as we discuss later.

Non-probabilistic sampling strategies have varied depending on the characteristics of the populations being studied. Prado used Facebook to identify and contact groups of foreigners in the city of Málaga, Spain. Snowball sampling and convenience sampling have been the most common methods employed by researchers in this collective work, used by Turner in investigating nightlife in Ibiza, Bliesemann de Guevara and Macaspac in conflict zones in Colombia and the Philippines, Díaz to identify members of the Spanish intelligence service, Del-Real and van Steen to contact cybersecurity experts, and Moneva and colleagues to access the hacker

community. In snowball sampling, the relationship between the referrer and referee is crucial, and well-positioned gatekeepers can play a vital role, as stressed by Carthy and Schuurman. The selection of strings and gatekeepers should ideally result in a more representative sample, despite the non-probability nature of snowball sampling. In these hard-to-reach populations, where it is challenging to control the sample or have knowledge of the entire population, researchers may rely on the concept of saturation to determine when to cease fieldwork. Saturation refers to the point at which new data or information no longer provides substantial insights or adds significantly to the understanding of the research topic. Díaz also adopted a similar criterion to decide when to conclude the fieldwork with Spanish intelligence agents. Vallés estimated that saturation was reached after interviewing 28 Roma *spoitor* and 19 non-Roma participants. Finally, despite securing the participation of about 60 cybersecurity experts for interviews, Del-Real opted to conclude their research after conducting 27 interviews. These examples illustrate the practical considerations researchers face when conducting research with hard-to-reach populations and the need to adapt sampling strategies accordingly.

Another challenge influencing sample design is the time factor. Accessing documents or obtaining necessary authorizations to interview individuals can take several months to a year. This timeline may be unfeasible depending on the type of research being conducted as noted by many authors such as Halty, Bueno, and Prado. Even when researchers follow the procedures, there is a risk of being denied access or receiving incomplete or irrelevant data. Once access is granted, it may take a significant amount of time to start the fieldwork. Researchers often face tight timelines, with pressure on their side rather than the organization's.

2.2 *Data Collection Techniques*

Overall, the authors have utilized various techniques for data collection during fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, surveys, documentary analysis, and focus groups. The interview technique has been particularly prominent among the research methods used in this book. It has served as the primary research method, a preparatory task for gathering field information, or a triangulation tool to validate and complement other data sources. Interviews provide direct one-on-one contact with participants, allowing researchers to gather rich qualitative data and insights. The approaches to conducting interviews vary among the researchers, ranging from predominantly positivist perspectives focusing on obtaining specific data, to intermediate post-positivist approaches, to constructivist positionings where meaning and understanding are cocreated between the researcher and the participant. These varying approaches reflect the diverse research goals and contexts explored in the book.

In addition to the commonly employed qualitative techniques, there exist lesser-utilized techniques within the field. One such infrequent technique is Lambelet, Ros, and Loetzer's "instructions to a double," which involved probationers

evaluating the behaviors of their peers without personalizing or referring to specific cases. Feixa, in his study of the gang members, has employed a diverse range of techniques over the years that align with the specific population and the chronological context of his observations. These techniques include participant observation, focus groups, in-depth interviews, life stories, and analysis of media reports. Among them, life stories emerge as the predominant and significant technique in his work. It is noteworthy that Bliesemann de Guevara and Macaspac, possibly due to the similarity of their research domains, also coincide with Feixa in utilizing techniques such as ethnographic immersion, participant observation, textile making methods, and narrative biographical interviews. Furthermore, Turner introduces the concept of “ethnographic immersion” as a technique that surpasses mere observation, exposing researchers to certain moral dilemmas. Turner describes an initial period of “unobtrusive observation” lasting 24 hours a day, during which he selects a specific location to meticulously observe and document his thoughts, observations, and emotions using a cell phone, capturing the essence of the moment. The subsequent phase involves marginal participation, necessitating a certain level of engagement with the participants and even potentially involving limited alcohol consumption to blend in with the environment and the people present. Once a level of trust and acceptance is established, Turner is invited to accompany the participants in their leisure activities during the evening and night, requiring a higher degree of participation.

Among the most innovative techniques are those being incorporated for the analysis of the cyber world. These include monitoring software, online ads as honeypots, and the analysis of secondary data from leaks or purchases. In the realm of topics explored in this book, there are a few noteworthy possibilities for experimentation, particularly within the cyber world. For instance, one approach involves issuing messages to different groups, directing them to various webpages or presenting diverse information (Moneva, Leukfeldt, and Romagna). Additionally, Vandebosch and Pabian have utilized other experimental techniques, such as creating vignettes to measure situational factors that explain bystanders’ behavior, designing digital games, employing pop-up messages, or utilizing mock-up social networking services.

The limited utilization of archives and documentation is a notable aspect worth considering. It is indeed true that many of the observed phenomena are ongoing and challenging to document comprehensively, except police data as illustrated by Burkhardt and Boivin. However, working with files presents a different scenario. For instance, Halty’s examination of prisoner files and Carthy and Schuurman’s analysis of police files provided them with a counter perspective to that presented by the media, scientific publications, and interviews, despite these files originally being compiled for police use rather than research purposes. Ingrascì also reflects on the significance of accessing police and judicial archives in the context of studying the Mafia, while Lambelet, Ros, and Kloetzer discuss the importance of probation files. Access to such files can prove useful for triangulation purposes. However, the challenging and unpredictable nature of accessing both the field and documentation can potentially result in prolonged research timelines.

Triangulation, although valuable for comprehending complex fields, is a technique that is seldom employed. Boxall, Meyer, Bartels, and Fitz-Gibbon acknowledge its usage in conjunction with the “free-text narratives and comments recorded by responding police officers” when studying incidents of domestic and family violence. Ingrasci also highlights the relevance of triangulation, particularly with police wiretaps, stating that “the observed scene through reading the transcription of taped conversations can be considered an authentic natural setting” due to the unawareness of the actors being monitored. Díaz extensively utilized various sources, including declassified archives, and successfully triangulated data with parliamentary statements and press reports. Molnar and Vallés, Prado, Vandebosh, and Pabian, as well as Friis, van Lith, van Bruchem, and Lindegaard, all mention the application of triangulation with different sources or data obtained online in their respective studies on violent behavior, terrorists, extremists, and video camera analysis. Although time-consuming, researchers who have employed triangulation emphasize its high utility.

3 Ethical and Methodological Considerations

3.1 Role of the Researcher

Once on the field, one of the first things that the researcher must decide – when possible – is perhaps which role they will adapt among the target population. This must be done in priority before the target population decides for the researcher without any control. This latter might greatly impact the fieldwork journey and the validity and reliability of the results. The necessity of assigning a role to the researcher within a group arises from the group’s need to categorize the stranger within their midst, thereby providing a framework for understanding what to expect, and what not to expect, from this “visitor” who will inevitably leave. Menih, who frequented places inhabited by women experiencing homelessness – occasionally accompanied by a social worker – consistently identified herself as a doctoral student to clarify the context of her presence. Boxall and colleagues as well as Burkhardt and Boivin continuously stressed that they were researchers, not police officers. Nonetheless, defining the role of the researcher is not always straightforward. Turner, in his study of leisure activities on the island of Ibiza, required time for his role to be understood, as people in that environment typically associated such inquiries with journalists or undercover police officers. It seemed astonishing to many participants that someone could “dup” the system and be paid for what appeared to be a holiday.

Features of the researcher such as their origin, ethnicity, or gender might pose challenges in regards to the role that is attributed to the scholar by the target population. However, to a much lesser extent to what other researchers have reported in the past. Interestingly, within their sensitive research field – male perpetrators of family and domestic violence – Boxall and colleagues reported no issue with gender bias

in their studies. In some instances, however, being a female researcher appears to have had a positive impact. Atkinson-Sheppard suggests that being a woman enabled easier access and contact generation on the streets and within NGOs in Bangladesh. Ingrascì formed a unique rapport with “ex-mafia women,” contrasting the “chivalrous attitude” displayed by male counterparts. Among one of the more prominent *pentiti*, this attitude became a means of avoiding discussions of violent incidents. Boxall, Meyer, Bartels, and Fitz-Gibbon indicate that rarely did a participant request to speak with a male researcher. One situation they did experience was the request by “indigenous respondents to undertake their interview with an Indigenous interviewer, although some prefer to speak with a non-Indigenous researcher, given the cultural shame associated with the issues and concerns about confidentiality being breached”.

The investigation of sensitive topics necessitates, perhaps more than in many other areas, a profound reflection on the researcher’s positionality: who I am and what reality I construct in relation to the participating subject. Prado acknowledges this when she emphasizes her understanding of the need to approach her research field while attempting to steer clear of its “cultural guidelines and hegemonic values” that could potentially distort the interpretation of the information obtained and create an image of the studied community as culturally inferior. Atkinson-Sheppard, being a foreigner in Bangladesh, and Macaspac, a Filipino citizen raised in Manila and residing in the United States, both underscore the complex relationship and positionality each had to navigate. Specifically for Macaspac, the intricacies of his situation are highlighted as someone trained in the Global North and conducting ethnographic research in his home country, the Global South. Mattheis provides a clear self-visualization and understanding of how her “identity, experience, and privilege as a white woman raised in the middle class in the United States who is committed to promoting social equality and equity” condition how she is perceived. The essence of who we are is not something we can change quickly, if at all.

A strategy that is not commonplace but has been employed by some of our researchers to enhance field understanding and mitigate the challenges of being in a “no man’s land,” as termed by Lambelet and colleagues, is the use of peer researchers. These individuals are typically either current or former members of the group being studied. Their insight into the people, codes, language, and culture of the group enables us to bridge the gap between our distinct worlds more easily. Menih employs this strategy, collaborating with a woman well-versed in the dynamics and codes of street life, whom she refers to as a “cultural consultant”. Similarly, Atkinson-Sheppard, adopted this approach by working with a human rights worker who had previously experienced homelessness. Prado, in her research, enlisted members from her research center, such as researchers or field assistants of diverse nationalities, cultures, and languages, to aid in understanding the cultural and linguistic context of her study. Feixa went so far as to hire a gang member as a research assistant, which facilitated interaction with other gang members, transcription of interviews, and assistance in interpreting the results. This gang member is also acknowledged as a coauthor in the book they coproduced. Undoubtedly, this underutilized strategy not only offers significant support in research but also carries the potential to empower the studied group or individual by providing them a direct voice.

Most of the time, the relationship between researchers and participants is imbalanced due to inherent structural inequalities. Contributors to this book specifically note that these relationships are not based on friendship or colleague rapport, but are rather unidirectional or based on mutual benefit. They caution against excessive emotional closeness, which can jeopardize the integrity of the investigation. While it is crucial not to foster friendships or a sense of equality with the participants, it is equally important to resist attempts by participants to assume a dominating role. Menih, cognizant of this, implemented preventive measures to avoid such circumstances. In the early stages of her research career, she, as a woman and young researcher, encountered patronizing attitudes from guards, which subsequently aided their understanding of the phenomenon. Sometimes participants may seek to challenge the researcher in a bid to comprehend their perspective. Bueno details instances where a participant deliberately created uncomfortable scenarios either for amusement or to test the researcher's boundaries, such as by exaggerating sexual information or adopting a seductive demeanor. Asking Carthy about parents' occupations could lead to awkward situations, especially when social class is considered, as it may undermine the researcher's credibility with the participant. Such attempts are often seen as an effort to shift the power dynamic. In Vallés' experience, one of the community's highly respected elders failed to show up at the agreed meeting time and place. Later, the same elder appeared unannounced at the researcher's house, asserting his authority. The authors typically manage these situations by maintaining silence, indicating that certain comments are inappropriate, and continuing with the interview. Nonconfrontation is generally viewed as the best strategy in these scenarios.

3.2 Locations and Times

The locations where interactions between participants and researchers took place have exhibited significant diversity, as evident in the multitude of research experiences contained in this book. Based on the authors' contributions, three types of spaces can be identified. The first type encompasses the settings where the phenomenon under observation naturally occurs, necessitating the researchers' presence in those locations. For instance, Turner conducted his research on leisure in Ibiza, which involved observing and engaging with participants in airports in the United Kingdom and Ibiza, various hotels, pool areas, cafes, restaurants, bars, and super clubs on the island. Vallés established a meeting space within the garden of the house he rented. Bliesemann de Guevara and Macaspac encountered a unique situation in rural communities in Colombia and the Philippines, where participants lacked neutral places like cafes that are commonly found in urban areas; consequently, meetings often had to be relocated to farmlands or homes, a practice that may not align with research ethics committee recommendations. The notion of "where the phenomenon occurs" poses intriguing connotations in the cyber world. In the research conducted by Moneva and colleagues on cybercriminals, accessing

these individuals proves challenging yet not impossible. They navigate the digital spaces where cybercriminals socialize and exchange knowledge, such as forums, chats, and social media platforms. A similar approach applies to forums or online environments where cyberbullying occurs, as in the case explored by Vandebosch and Pabian.

When the choice of location is not influenced by the aforementioned reasons, the key factor is to identify a space where participants feel comfortable. In many cases, participants are given the autonomy to decide the location themselves, a practice that is commonly followed by the authors of this book. The range of spaces chosen by participants has been diverse. For example, interactions have taken place in parish offices in the study of Balcells and Tamarit; NGO premises or social workers' offices in Menih's research; a caravan accommodating sex workers or sex work parlors in Molnar's case; public places such as cafeterias, offices, or private homes in Díaz's study; parliamentarians' offices in Coller and Alcántara's research; or the authors' professional offices as reported Diamint and Martínez. Ensuring privacy can be challenging in small communities, whether they are rural towns or state prisons. Vallés, Boxall, and colleagues emphasize the importance of selecting a space that maximizes participant comfort and facilitates information sharing while adhering to the security requirements outlined by ethics committees. Even in seemingly public spaces like the streets or bus stops where individuals experiencing homelessness spend their days, or in shelters where they stay overnight as in Menih's case, negotiation regarding both the space and time of interaction remains crucial.

In general, the amount of time available for the authors of this book to spend with participants has been limited. One hour is typically allocated for conducting interviews, although there are instances where the duration significantly extends beyond this timeframe. Examples of longer interviews can be found in the works of Menih, Díaz, and Coller and Alcántara, among others. Molnar and Vallés had interview durations ranging from 20 minutes to 2 hours, similar to the range observed in the interviews conducted by Diamint and Martínez. This demonstrates that the duration of interviews is not necessarily linked to the type of participants involved. Güerri and Martí highlight that the available time was often reduced due to various internal processes that needed to be followed, starting from the moment of arrival at the penitentiary until the inmate's presence.

Participant observation, although not common among the authors of this book, presents a separate case. Notable examples include Turner's 3-month immersion on the island of Ibiza in August over three different years, Atkinson-Sheppard's 3-year study with street children, and Molnar's several years of engagement with sex workers, as well as Menih's involvement with women experiencing homelessness. When conducting research using the Internet or other technologies, the element of time also plays a significant role. Ball and Broadhurst highlight that in their study of cybercrime and darknet services, interaction with participants can be a protracted process, involving delays between asking a question in a forum and receiving a response, and repeating the cycle. On the other hand, Moneva and colleagues note that offline interviews tend to require less time, and different types of data can be obtained. Some researchers have also found success with alternative formats for interviews, such as audio exchanges, as a variant of the traditional interview.

It is rather unlikely that researchers would have the opportunity to contact the same person again to gather missed information. Therefore, the experiences of the researchers underscore the unique and invaluable nature of each interaction with a participant. Each interaction represents a virtually irreplaceable opportunity to obtain crucial information and construct meaning together. However, Halty did interview once or twice on a more regular basis: the first time for the interview and the second time to administer a supplementary test. In other cases, the challenges of conducting a second interview were often associated with cumbersome and time-consuming bureaucratic processes, as observed in Ingrasci's research with the *pen-titi*. That is the reason why in her case interviews lasted between 4 and 8 hours. Nonetheless, there was an exceptional situation where Ingrasci deemed it necessary to make the effort to request a new interview with one of the participants.

3.3 Transparency

Transparency is both a value and a tool for researchers seeking access to the field. It is a crucial element that should be present throughout all phases of research. Its importance lies in establishing and maintaining credibility, which allows researchers to effectively collect the necessary data. Collier and Alcántara, who have been conducting studies on parliamentary elites for over 30 years, emphasize the need to explain their objectives transparently and demonstrate reliability through previous research and publications. By showcasing their track record and commitment to protecting sources and sensitive information, they establish their scientific credibility. They also direct potential participants to their research group's website, further emphasizing their transparent approach.

In addition to obtaining informed consent, it is crucial to provide potential participants with comprehensive information about the research project, including its objectives, research team, funding, and other relevant details. In a digital age where researchers' online presence can be easily scrutinized, creating a web page – whether personal or institutional – housing information about the researchers and their work can serve as a beneficial strategy. By referring potential participants and organizations to this webpage, researchers can establish credibility and transparency, showcasing their previous articles, reports, press releases, or television appearances. Collier and Alcántara have successfully employed this approach, and Diamint and Martínez express regret that they did not do the same, as it could have potentially alleviated some of the suspicions some participants had on their work. Several authors, including Collier and Alcántara, Díaz, and Balcells and Tamarit, emphasize that gatekeepers and some participants explicitly or implicitly conveyed that they had researched their identities before granting access to the study.

However, there are certain contexts where achieving such transparency is not feasible. For example, inmates in correctional facilities often lack Internet access, making it impossible for them to independently verify the researcher's identity or credibility. This can create a fertile ground for suspicion, with inmates perceiving

the researcher as an undercover police officer seeking to extract information. In some cases, providing personal information about the researcher can even pose a safety risk, as illustrated by Halty's experience with criminal psychopaths. Navigating the balance between transparency and potential risks or constraints posed by specific settings is a complex endeavor. Researchers must carefully consider the context and the potential implications before deciding on the level of transparency that can be reasonably achieved while ensuring the safety and ethical integrity of the study.

Transparency encompasses not only revealing the identity of researchers but also effectively communicating their research objectives. Carthy and Schuurman recognized that their initial verbose and formal messages to potential participants might have deterred some from participating. Reflecting on this issue, they adjusted their approach and found greater success. They began with a concise introductory message and then arranged phone or Skype appointments to discuss the research in detail, including informed consent procedures. This shift in strategy proved to be more effective in engaging potential participants. The importance of providing comprehensive information extends beyond researcher identity. Gassó and Gómez-Durán's experience highlights the significance of conveying all necessary details. When sending questionnaires on teenagers' sexual behavior to school principals, they observed that those who received the questionnaire were more open to discussing the data collection process and informing parents, compared to principals who did not receive the questionnaire. The latter group, in large numbers, declined to participate in the study. This demonstrates the impact of providing information and engaging stakeholders, which can influence their willingness to collaborate.

In the study of phenomena like cybercrime, Moneva and colleagues highlight the value of public profiles that allow participants to verify the researcher's identity and authenticity. Ingrasci's experience with *pentiti*, who have been conditioned to be suspicious since childhood, further underscores the need to create a trustworthy environment. In cases such as Díaz's engagement with intelligence officers, where confusion with journalists or curiosity-seekers must be avoided, strict adherence to anticipated topics and the distribution of his research center's business card served as protective measures. The challenge of establishing trust is also evident in Feixa's work with gang members, who initially questioned his identity as a researcher, suspecting him of being a policeman or journalist. Macaspac, in his research on rural communities, had to navigate between the roles of "social worker" and "political activist" to gain acceptance and build rapport. Overall, transparency plays a vital role in research, ensuring credibility, generating trust, and facilitating fruitful engagement with participants. By openly communicating objectives, demonstrating reliability, and adapting to the specific context, researchers can establish the necessary foundations for successful data collection and collaboration.

Transparency serves also as a means to address participants' concerns and misconceptions regarding the purpose and focus of the research. In cases where sensitive or controversial topics are being investigated, participants may question the

motives behind the study. Balcells and Tamarit encountered such inquiries when investigating cases of abuse within the Church. Participants expressed curiosity about why the researchers chose to focus on this particular aspect rather than other topics like Catholic family dynamics or education. By being transparent and open about their intentions and motivations, the researchers could provide participants with a clearer understanding of the research objectives. Similarly, Molnar and Vallés faced questions from Roma community members who wondered why the researchers were specifically interested in studying the Roma population and not non-Roma individuals. In this case, transparency was necessary to address concerns about potential biases or misconceptions. By engaging in open dialogue and explaining the reasons for their research focus, the researchers could dispel any notions of favoritism or disregard for other cultural groups. By addressing participants' concerns and providing clear explanations for the research focus, researchers can build rapport and alleviate any doubts about their intentions.

Related to transparency, some researchers engage themselves to provide feedback to the participants and stakeholders about the results of the research. Brunovskis, Surtees, and Halty found that promising to provide feedback to organizations eased access to trafficked persons and criminal psychopaths, respectively. However, caution is needed regarding the "price" of such access. For Halty, informed consent must include this communication of results and parents must understand the difference between being informed of research results and receiving an individualized report on whether their child "meets the criteria for psychopathy." In the case of sex offenders, Bueno recommends providing feedback to the prison director at the end of the fieldwork, without revealing specific individual data. Collier and Alcántara found that sending parliamentarians a preview of the results before publication kept participation high across different waves of the study. Diamint and Martínez encountered more issues than benefits when providing intermediate data, as attempts to alter or influence the investigation emerged once preliminary data were known.

Nevertheless, a recurring theme is that participants often express preference to the researcher that certain parts of the interviews or meetings remain unrecorded. In such instances, the investigator must balance the convenience of having the recording against the likelihood of gathering more information if the session is not recorded. When recording is not feasible, swift note-taking or jotting down of key words becomes essential, followed by documenting the information immediately after the interview concludes. Memory should never be the sole method of information retention, given its selective nature where some elements adhere more firmly than others. Bueno suggests having a second researcher present, particularly if the primary investigator is inexperienced. This approach, however, is often unfeasible due to budgetary constraints. In Bueno's case, postgraduate students were hired for this role. Instances of dual-researcher presence are also seen in the fieldwork of Collier and Alcántara, as well as Balcells and Tamarit.

3.4 *Rapport*

Numerous chapters have extensively discussed the diverse strategies employed to establish rapport with research participants, reflecting the varied personalities of researchers. Transparency, as mentioned above, is a key step to cultivate rapport. Researchers have employed various strategies to establish rapport with participants, all centered around connecting with the human being behind the “participant.” Some strategies are basic, such as personalizing invitations, addressing participants by name, or engaging in conversations on topics unrelated to the research. Other strategies involve nonverbal cues, such as maintaining eye contact, using animated facial expressions and reassuring tones of voice, and minimizing interruptions during observations by refraining from taking notes, giving participants sufficient time to interact, avoiding impatience, utilizing open-ended dialogue-style questions, discussing sports or employing humor are additional rapport-building techniques cited by most of authors. In addition, respecting cultural differences and sensitivities has also been cited as key elements in establishing rapport with participants.

In addition, the significance of speaking to participants in their language with their vocabulary is emphasized across various contexts, including intelligence officers by Díaz, police officers by Burkhardt and Boivin, sex workers by Molnar, women experiencing homelessness by Menih, migrant women by Mesquita and Faria, cybercriminals by Moneva, Leukfeldt, and Romagna, military elites by Diamint and Martínez, and probationers by Lambelet, Ros, and Loetzer. Speaking their language entails understanding their world and the experiences they will be asked to share. Demonstrating a lack of understanding of their world not only hampers cooperation, but can also engender suspicion, as highlighted by Moneva, Leukfeldt, and Romagna in their research on cybercrime. This understanding does not always have to be limited to technical knowledge specific to the research topic. Borges not only adapted her language to that of the refugee women but also took the initiative to learn about their countries of origin and the names of regional dishes, further enhancing the connection and rapport established. Carthy and Schuurman draw attention to the importance of language use when dealing with terrorists or members of extremist groups, as certain words or phrases may resonate positively with some individuals while causing offense to others. In the case of Boxall and colleagues, gatekeepers warned them that using terms like “perpetrators”, “abusers” or “offenders” in recruitment materials could hinder the recruitment process and subsequent rapport with the participants. Similarly, Güerri and Martí point out that researchers are often unfamiliar with the slang used in prisons, at least initially, prompting them to request translation of prison-specific terminology into their own vocabulary during initial meetings.

However, certain situations present challenges in cultivating rapport due to the lack of control over the interview environment and conditions. For instance, Ingrasci highlights the scenario where she interviewed mafia *pentiti*, wherein the police could ask to be present. In such instances, the researcher’s primary challenge was to disregard the police’s presence, although complete control over the participant’s

ability to do the same was limited. Similarly, Halty acknowledges the difficulty of building rapport with inmates within a prison setting. Bueno concurs with this predicament, specifically within the context of engaging sex offenders in prison; in this case, in addition, there were the serious consequences for him if the rest of the inmates discovered the crime for which he was in prison. Nonetheless, the lack of control over the interview environment is not exclusively confined to prison settings. Vallés' research with the Roma community exemplifies situations where the interview took place in the Roma women's homes, and the men "joined the interview and took control of the answers" [...] "relegating the women to the background."

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated modifications in fieldwork, rendering the task of generating rapport more challenging. Nonetheless, researchers whose fieldwork was affected generally report that it was still possible to establish acceptable rapport through virtual platforms or even when physical distancing and face mask that covered a significant portion of the face were required. Mesquita and Faria conducted interviews with migrant women online amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the participants' freedom of expression, a code word was established to indicate if they were no longer alone in the room, hindering open communication. Additionally, the presence of a translator sharing the screen with the researcher and the refugee woman further complicated the situation, impeding the researchers' ability to simultaneously comprehend the participant's words and nonverbal cues.

Establishing rapport with individuals who are significantly different from us, as often encountered in the topics explored in this book, can be tremendously complex. Several authors in this work express their initial fears and concerns about developing hatred or strong repulsion toward the participants once they come face-to-face with them. This apprehension is understandable, considering the abhorrent behaviors some participants have engaged in, such as committing acts of violence against vulnerable individuals or even murdering their own family members. Mattheis, a researcher studying male supremacism, faced a unique situation where she herself is identified as a threat by the very groups she studies, experiencing episodes of online harassment. Ingrascì reflects on the conflicting feelings she experienced when listening to a 'Ndrangheta *pentito*'s account of a series of murders, describing it as a horrible reaction within herself. However, she managed to maintain a neutral attitude during the interview, perceiving the interview setting as a separate world that facilitated this neutrality. Yet, she acknowledges the difficulties of coping with those feelings once she left the setting and transcribed the interview. Carthy and Schuurman discuss how encounters with participants can generate discomfort and even anger, serving as reminders of researchers' own biases. In certain cases, the researcher's position vis-à-vis the participant can be even more complex to manage. Halty, for instance, describes her participants as criminal psychopaths with a superficial charm and manipulative capabilities, despite the atrocious acts they have committed, such as the violent deaths of siblings or parents.

Rapport, however, does not serve as an impenetrable defense against deception or distortion from the participants. The identification of the latter is imperative to protect the reliability and validity of the research. Halty candidly acknowledges instances where participants have lied to her, either from the beginning of the

interview or even midway through. She has learned not to confront them, as it can introduce an additional element to assess psychopathy, and more importantly, confrontation does not facilitate the progression of the interview. A similar situation involving manipulation of the study was encountered by Friis, van Lith, van Bruchem, and Lindegaard in their research on violent interactions between ticket inspectors and ticketless passengers in public buses in Denmark. To promote utmost transparency regarding their research objectives, participants were provided with prior research findings. This allowed them to familiarize themselves with the researchers' hypotheses and the specific observations the researchers sought to make. However, some participants later expressed suspicions that certain participants (ticket inspectors) had modified their behavior while under observation. Whether driven by different motives or sharing similar reasons, instances of deception can also manifest in the cyber world as highlighted by Moneva and colleagues. In such cases, participants may attempt to impress the interviewer by exaggerating or downplaying their activities or may choose to engage in an agreeable and accommodating conversation rather than a challenging one.

3.5 Compensation

Compensation plays a pivotal role in influencing the recruitment of potential participants. It can be material or immaterial, from financial incentives to social benefits. While monetary compensation may seem the most direct means of attracting participants, this book's authors often did not favor it, either by choice or necessity. Fernández and Bartolomé encountered issues when offering gift cards as compensation, inciting discontent among non-recipients at a youth center. They even faced instances of blackmail, such as a minor demanding increased pay and threatening to delay the interview. In response, they chose to withdraw the offer and lose the participant. Güerri and Martí attempted to compensate inmates, but they were often hampered by budgetary limitations or bureaucratic constraints. Putting money into each participant's prison account proved burdensome for staff, leading to alternative suggestions such as donations of books or soccer equipment.

Carthy and Schuurman rejected a proposal to gain access to terrorists, who had not previously been part of any scientific research, in return for financial incentives. Similarly, Feixa was usually hesitant to offer payment, fearing it could engender a "chain of interest" that might bias the results. Nonetheless, Feixa made an exception by compensating a gang member for project hours. He could not, however, hire a Latin King or a Ñeta due to funding institutions' refusal – a hurdle he later overcame. Menih chose not to compensate her homeless women participants, opting instead to build trust. This decision proved effective as none of the women sought compensation. However, she did offer coffee and cookies. Atkinson-Sheppard used a similar approach, providing food or money to street children in Bangladesh while observing their daily routines.

Nonmaterial forms of compensation can also prove effective. Halty found that the opportunity to break the monotony of daily life was a significant incentive for young inmates to participate in her studies. The researcher's mere presence could act as a protective element against extortion or violence, according to Bliesemann de Guevara and Macaspac. Other researchers found value in communicating the importance and uniqueness of the participants' contributions, or earning the support of a prestigious or authoritative figure. Moneva and colleagues found that IT security students might prefer extra assignment points over modest monetary compensation, highlighting the potential appeal of nonmaterial incentives. Vandebosch and Pabian took a novel approach by raffling a cinema ticket among participating schoolchildren.

However, caution should be exercised when compensation is linked to personal benefits, particularly among vulnerable populations. Güerri, Martí, Carthy, Schuurman, Bliesemann de Guevara, and Macaspac emphasized that researchers must be clear that participation would not impact personal circumstances, such as prison benefits or relocation assistance for refugees. Misleading participants could give the false impression that the researcher can improve their situation, potentially affecting the data's reliability, and the "voluntariness" of their participation.

3.6 Protection of the Participants

Participant's protection plays a significant role in the research projects included in this book. Researchers take various steps to protect participants from stigmatization and harm. The protection of research participants is encapsulated in a well-known document referred to as the informed consent. This document, typically the outcome of careful deliberation by the researcher and, potentially, the ethics committee, outlines the terms for interaction between the participant and the researcher. The key elements of informed consent include understanding, capacity to consent, and voluntariness. First, the prospective participant must comprehensively understand what they are consenting to. To enhance understanding, Carthy and Schuurman present the document after an initial discussion; however, this strategy is not universally effective. Due to the complexity of addressing ethical issues and the low literacy level among participants, Molnar and Vallés explained them that informed consent is a requirement from their university to ensure respect for the person. Menih made extensive efforts to explain her research objectives to women in street situations slowly and in simple terms.

The second aspect is the capacity to consent. Commonly, this involves minors and individuals in state custody, as illustrated by the cases of Halty, Pereda, and Bueno. In the research on cyberbullying by Vandebosch and Pabian, after securing parental consent, the minors were asked if they wished to participate, investing significant effort in explaining the nature of their participation. Fernández and Bartolomé sought consent from parents or guardians, but always asked the minors if they wished to be part of the study. They advise working with participants who

can legally consent, that is, those aged 14 and older in Spain. Therefore, contacting parents, either directly or through schools, is vital, as studies involving minors often go through school channels. In situations where participants are held in establishments or institutions under state control, the ethical responsibility shifts to these gatekeepers. Regarding street children, due to the inability to contact their parents, the director of the NGO where they stayed consented on their behalf. With detained minors, Halty left consent to be arranged directly between the center and the families. Only in the case of Brunovskis and Surtees was a minor denied continued participation in the study despite parental consent, indicating a gatekeeper's intent to protect the NGO. In studies involving online communities, consent management can become complicated. When participants might be lying about their age, attempting to seek parental consent could risk losing valuable sample data. When in doubt, it is recommended to treat participants as minors.

Finally, voluntariness in participation need to be considered from various angles. It entails eliminating coercive elements and using an approach that reinforces the voluntary nature of participation. Importantly, power imbalances between the researcher and the participant, as pointed out by Vandebosch and Pabian, can result in individuals feeling pressured to participate or continue participation. Researchers must be alert to any discomfort that might invalidate given consent. In the case of minors, they might comply due to expectations from parents or gatekeepers. This dynamic can also occur in environments with power imbalances, such as the military training centers in Martínez's study. In a highly hierarchical environment where dissent is not a valued element of the organizational culture, trainees in a military classroom have few options to show that their consent is not voluntary or even to leave. The cyber world introduces complexities around obtaining consent. The ongoing debate about the public or private nature of online information and the need for informed consent is aptly described by Mattheis. In situations involving honeypots, ethical dilemmas arise since we might be deceiving the participant by not informing them about the study. With groups that perceive informed consent as dangerous, such as immigrant minors, consent can be both verbal and written. For individuals who view signing official documents as risky or testimonial, recorded oral consent can be utilized. In certain situations where recorded oral consent is inappropriate or unsafe, the researcher can use "single-party testimonial consent."

Anonymization of participants is a fundamental measure of protection. Several methods are used by researchers to maintain the anonymity of their subjects, such as replacing names with codes or pseudonyms. This process extends not only to transcripts or recordings but can also be applied in informed consent. However, care must be taken to ensure that the data provided do not allow for deductive revelation of the participant's identity, especially in small communities or specific populations. When considering online research and cybercrime, anonymity extends to nicknames and online identifiers. Similar to physical-world names, these nicknames are unique identifiers within their online communities. Moreover, researchers must be mindful of rephrasing online messages or communications as they can be traced back to the participants.

A significant dimension of protection also involves not revealing all the information collected. This raises questions about whether this constitutes self-censorship or participant's protection. Some researchers acknowledge they are more considerate about what information to disclose, especially when the information may have a potential negative impact on survivors or specific groups. Finally, the media plays a dual role in research dissemination. While it can be an ally in broadcasting research findings to a broader audience, it can also attract undesirable attention. This media attention could lead to adverse outcomes ranging from the loss of funding to the stigmatization of the research group or community. It is therefore essential for researchers to prepare and manage their research dissemination materials carefully and potentially liaise with their institutions' press and scientific dissemination services for effective media management.

3.7 Emotional Risks

In this collection of experiences, the editors note that while situational risks have garnered some attention in the recommendations from ethics committees, emotional risks have received less. Several researchers admitted overlooking the potential emotional cost of their research topics, especially early in their careers. In addition, some experienced serious emotional attacks or pressures. Mattheis faced harassment from extremists on social media, receiving varied responses from peers, however without a clear line of action ranging from the opposite extremes of "fight back" to "don't feed the trolls." On the other hand, researchers such as Borges and Faría felt helpless about their inability to help more to these refugee women, and Bueno had disturbing experiences working with inmates who had abused minors. Notably, emotional exposure does not exclusively stem from personal contact; it can also arise from interacting with materials. For instance, Mattheis found her work with subjects related to hate, extremism, and violence particularly challenging due to the disturbing content, while Burkhardt and Boivin mention the traumatic effect on watching highly violent police content.

Emotion management should ideally start before entering the field, as Atkinson-Sheppard illustrates, who dealt with shock and anxiety while working with street children. Likewise, Pereda highlights the emotional impact of working with victimized minors, and Prado echoes the same sentiment from his experience with incarcerated youth. However, safety recommendations provided by ethics committees to address such issues seem insufficient. Mattheis, for instance, found a lack of resources and guidance to tackle harassment. The accounts presented in this book highlight the pressing need for more attention to emotional risks, which, if left unaddressed, can profoundly affect researchers. Enhanced support from ethics committees and more robust systems to deal with these emotional challenges are necessary for the well-being of researchers and the integrity of the research process.

Authors' strategies to minimize the emotional fatigue can take many forms, such as delaying interviews, taking breaks, or reducing the intensity of fieldwork.

However, even with such strategies, researchers often grapple with strong emotions like anger, grief, frustration, powerlessness, fear, exhaustion, distress, and disgust. Consequently, they have developed various coping mechanisms such as limiting the number of cases worked on per day, meditation, mindfulness techniques, maintaining general fitness, and spending time in nature. Above all, debriefing with colleagues, partners, or supervisors seems to be a common and critical emotional protection technique used by almost all researchers. However, the responsibility often falls on close associates and family members, who most probably do not have the specific training needed to assist in the process. Keeping a fieldwork journal has also proven extremely useful for many researchers as it serves not only to document their work but also to record their experiences and emotions. Despite these strategies, researchers must confront the realities of project timelines and funding, which may restrict their ability to take necessary breaks.

The role of transcriptionists and translators in research is frequently underestimated – as research actors – yet their involvement is crucial. These professionals form the bridge between raw data and analyzable material, transforming spoken words into written text or translating content into other languages. Their work goes far beyond a mere literal conversion. They are often tasked with conveying complex and nuanced linguistic elements, which can profoundly impact the understanding and interpretation of the data. Incorporating transcriptionists and translators from the outset of a research project can have several benefits. First, it enables them to become familiar with the project's objectives, terminologies, and context. This early immersion can lead to more accurate and contextually relevant transcriptions or translations. Second, their integration from the inception of the project encourages trust-building between researchers and these professionals. This trust is key in ensuring open communication and mutual understanding, which can significantly enhance the accuracy and relevance of the transcribed or translated material. Finally, transcriptionists and translators can provide a layer of emotional protection. Research often involves dealing with sensitive or emotionally charged data. Having professionals who are skilled in handling such material can safeguard the emotional well-being of both participants and researchers while ensuring that the emotional undertones of the data are preserved and accurately reflected in the transcriptions or translations. Therefore, acknowledging the critical role of transcriptionists and translators and involving them from the beginning of a research project can profoundly enhance the research process and outcomes.

3.8 Departure from the Field

Regarding the departure from the field, formal farewells with gatekeepers, such as sending them a copy of the finished work or a summary of the main findings, seem to be common. This gesture not only shows appreciation for their assistance, but can also provide valuable feedback to help improve their work or practice. However, saying goodbye to participants can be more challenging due to a variety of reasons.

The researcher might continue being connected to the field, either through further similar research or by virtue of living in the same area. Researchers with an activist leaning may stay involved in advocacy for their participants or to continue addressing the issues studied.

Another consideration is the emotional toll and sense of responsibility researchers often feel toward their subjects. Some researchers find solace in the knowledge that their work could potentially help mitigate suffering or improve conditions for the participants or similar groups. It is also evident that giving feedback or providing a form of contact for participants can be an important part of the departure process, even if it is not always utilized by the participants. Researchers must also be cautious in navigating relationships with participants that might want to extend beyond the research project, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics or populations that might involve manipulation.

In many cases, a specific act or event symbolizing the farewell seems to be a fitting conclusion. This can take various forms, such as small parties or workshops to present the results. Some researchers have maintained a long and close relationship with some of the participants; however, it is not the most frequent. Ultimately, although parting can be difficult, both the researchers and their participants generally understand that it is an inevitable aspect of the research process.

3.9 Red Lines

Navigating the research ethics field is often complex, as it requires a delicate balance between obtaining the necessary data while ensuring participants' rights, privacy, and safety. It is, therefore, crucial to establish "red lines" or ethical boundaries that must not be crossed, both for the researcher and for the participants. It is interesting to note how different researchers address these red lines differently, depending on their research context. The boundary established by Carthy and Schuurman, for instance, serves to prevent participants from disclosing past or future illegal actions – what seems to be the most evident red line for most authors – that they have not previously revealed to the authorities. Similarly, Moneva, Leukfeldt, and Romagna ensured that their virtual interactions did not foster or encourage illegal activities.

Working with vulnerable groups, especially minors, poses additional red lines. In the case of Prado, the intention to commit suicide expressed by some minors required a specific protocol to ensure their safety. This included encouraging the minors to speak to a trusted inmate or prison professional and checking whether an anti-suicide protocol was in place. This example demonstrates the importance of having a plan for possible crises and being proactive in ensuring participants' welfare. Fernández and Bartolomé highlight two scenarios where confidentiality commitment can be breached: when minors are victims of abuse or mistreatment, and when they are causing harm to themselves or others. The latter scenario aligns with Prado's approach, but it also involves notifying the authorities. The same strategy

was employed by Vandebosch and Pabian when they observed severe cases of cyberbullying.

Addressing the issue of minors revealing criminal acts, Halty's approach demonstrates the importance of ensuring the welfare of the child over strict adherence to confidentiality. She proposes a process of discussion and mediation, guiding the minor toward disclosure of that information to the person in charge of the center. Similarly, Atkinson-Sheppard, while working on the streets of Bangladesh, agreed on a child protection policy with the NGO director, which involves mutual consultation and assistance when a child discloses a risk to themselves or others. These cases underscore the complexity of working with minors and the importance of prioritizing their safety.

However, it is crucial to understand the implications of cultural and geographical context when dealing with these issues. Not every approach that works in the Global North can be applicable in the Global South, due to potential lack of social services or the risk that police involvement might pose to the child. As such, researchers must adapt their red lines and responses to suit the specific contexts in which they work. Furthermore, researchers must also establish boundaries unrelated to legal issues, to preserve their objectivity and the validity of their work. Menih, for instance, decided not to consume alcohol when offered, while Turner made it a point not to interview individuals in extreme states of intoxication. These guidelines are important to maintain the researcher's professional conduct and to ensure reliable data collection. But the researcher must know when to intervene. For example, in a case of severe ecstasy intoxication of one of the tourists, contrary to what the girl's friends said, Turner decided to call two doctors to help the tourist. And this situation leads Turner to state that these red lines are an "issue that requires careful consideration before starting the fieldwork."

These examples show that establishing ethical boundaries is not a one-size-fits-all process. Instead, it requires careful consideration of the specific research context and participants involved. However, some common principles apply across different scenarios, such as the need for clear communication about these red lines and the informed consent process, a commitment to prioritize participants' welfare, and a readiness to act responsibly when these lines are crossed. Despite the complexities and challenges, the ultimate aim is to ensure research integrity and respect for participants' rights and dignity.

4 Looking Forward: Lessons Learned

The wide range of experiences detailed in this book makes it challenging to extract a singular set of lessons learned; indeed, it could be argued that this section on lessons learned reflects the biases of the three editors who have penned them and may be more a result of our own perceptions, needs, insecurities, and certainties when it comes to fieldwork. Regardless, it is crucial to conclude with the understanding that

these lessons serve as reflection points and potential avenues for improving research in criminology and security studies.

The first lesson we have drawn emphasizes the need for flexibility in approaching the field. If any research topic can be erratic and unpredictable, this is especially true for sensitive hard-to-reach groups. Consequently, we must prepare intensively for the moment when the field reveals all its facets and aspects of the problem and be ready for surprises. Turner, for instance, shares his insights on which is the best timing to ask participants about illegal drug use. The timing is not exact, so the researcher's most valuable tool is the ability to "read the dynamics of the situation and instinctively know when it feels okay to ask these difficult questions." Ingrassi discusses "how to make this space rewarding without neglecting rigorous procedures and overcoming the pitfalls that this field of research produces by definition," a feat achieved by "emphasizing transparency and reflexivity as much as possible." Despite the long duration of fieldwork on these topics, most of the investigations included in this book limit contact with the participant to a single occasion. This solitary instance, though unique, is the time from which we must extract as much information as possible. Consequently, we may have a distorted perception of the field and believe we have broad knowledge when, in reality, we merely possess fragments of numerous individuals' lives and experiences. Therefore, preparing thoroughly and ensuring a good sample are essential tasks.

Second, the need for better training to manage the multitude of varied and intense emotions generated in the field is an aspect all researchers agree upon. Beyond having a protocol provided by or developed in collaboration with the ethics committee, it is essential to train doctoral students and early-career researchers, as pointed out by Borges and Mattheis and corroborated by nearly all researchers. Mattheis even mentions including a provision for "trauma counseling" in his recent grant applications. This focus should extend to often-overlooked roles, such as translators or transcribers, who handle sensitive material alongside researchers.

Third, the positionality of the researcher and their relationship with the subject under investigation is a significant concern for researchers, especially given the lack of information, training, and most importantly, reflection. The sensitivity of certain subjects, whether due to the vulnerability of the participants or the detestable nature of their behavior, can make it challenging to identify our position during fieldwork. The diverse cultural schemas we have can cause certain situations and relationships to carry different meanings. As Molnar and Vallés have suggested, we must "be self-critical and question our own assumptions." The concept of normality, for instance, varies between a repentant mafia woman and a street child working in an "illegal" capacity. Both have worldviews that may not align with those of the researcher, making it crucial to know where we stand.

Researcher activism is another important aspect. It is complex to enter these fields, conduct research, and leave without aspiring to effect some change in the unjust relations we have witnessed. Some researchers clearly state their stance before entering the field, while others advocate that the knowledge gained, despite the associated emotional cost and hardship, should be used to better societal policies regarding significant social issues. The research field often serves as a medium for

the researcher to perceive unexplored human dimensions and reflect on possible courses of action. Therefore, it is essential to engage young researchers in conscious reflection on their approach to the subject of study, particularly the participatory action research approach.

Fifth, data protection is another area requiring further improvement. Many researchers have acknowledged that current data protection systems have weaknesses. Not all of us have the technical expertise to fully understand the intricacies of the cloud where we store our data, the devices we connect it to, or what residual data might remain on another system or cloud when we delete it. There have been instances when we have retained data for future reference or situations when a research fellow who had a copy of the database misplaced their computer or left the research center without returning the data. Thus, it is critical that we continue to improve on data encryption and de-anonymization, even during the research design process. Furthermore, we need to identify the most reliable video conferencing systems, as not all countries offer the same level of security in communications.

Sixth, one promising direction for future research is the application or adaptation of our current understanding of the digital world. What we have learned so far is that while some topics can be addressed with minor adaptations, others require us to learn from colleagues already exploring these areas, discussing their methodological adaptations. Aspects like data ownership, the observer's role, researcher safety, and research rhythms still need careful deliberation. Mattheis aptly notes that the protocols used in the so-called "real world" contexts may not have been fully adapted for digital research, and researchers engaging in online studies may not have received training on widely agreed ethical and safety protocols for their work.

Finally, more emphasis should be placed on exiting the field. They can be emotionally and logistically challenging, but proper preparation and adaptability are necessary. We should honor our promises to participants and help them understand the process that has aroused our scientific curiosity. Simple gestures such as sending them summaries of the final conclusions in clear language can be a way to reciprocate their time and attention. Or even producing an audio, or maybe a short video to ease them the access to the conclusions. We, as researchers, are the only ones who have a complete view of the whole research. We are the only ones who can give coherence to what we heard and experienced; however, for the participants, the transcribers, the translators, they will only have brushstrokes – sometimes painful ones – and for which they cannot create a narrative that helps them to cope with the potential emotional impact.

In sum, balancing methods, ethics, and emotions are indeed integral parts of research, especially when investigating sensitive topics. Our interest in these topics may stem from a desire to understand complex social problems and contribute toward solutions. By sharing these experiences, we can foster collective learning and improvement in our research practices. We hope that the experiences and knowledge gained over the years by all the authors during their fieldwork can be invaluable not only for us, but also for other researchers navigating similar paths.

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Correction to: Fieldwork Experiences in Criminology and Security Studies



Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández, Cristina Del-Real, and Lorena Molnar

Correction to:

A. M. Díaz-Fernández et al. (eds.), *Fieldwork Experiences
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The book was inadvertently published with incorrect spelling of the author's name in Chapters 1 and 32 and also in the entire book including the Front matter (wherever the name is appearing) as Antonio M. Díaz-Fernández whereas it should be Given Name "Antonio M." Family Name "Díaz-Fernández".

The updated version of this book can be found at
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41574-6>

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