

Chapter 23

Protecting Them, Protecting You: Tips and Cautions When Doing Research in Sexual Offending



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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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