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# **Researching Young Offenders: Navigating Methodological Challenges and Reframing Ethical Responsibilities**

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Adeela has a background in psychology and education and has been teaching in higher education for over 15 years. Her doctoral research drew on psychological theories to explore how to re-engage young offenders with formal education and learning in a secure custodial setting. Adeela's other research includes how to develop academic resilience and buoyancy in higher education students. She has also worked on international projects in Rwanda, Pakistan and European Erasmus+ projects on emotional education and early school leaving as well as more recently two projects with secure custodial settings across Europe including Spain, Italy, Germany, Belgium and Portugal.

## **Researching Young Offenders: Navigating Methodological Challenges and Managing Ethical Responsibilities**

Young offenders' perceptions of their educational experiences are little researched not least because of methodological and ethical challenges. These include being difficult to access, questions on their reliability as interviewees and their 'doubly vulnerable' position, due to the secure locked context and their age. This article draws on doctoral research, which sought to re-engage young offenders with education and learning whilst in a custodial setting, to discuss navigating such methodological challenges and managing emergent ethical responsibilities.

It is argued that interview methods which are based on the principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (CHE) are crucial methodological tools when interviewing 'doubly vulnerable' participants. Using the principles of CHE contributed to rebalancing the power dynamics between researcher and participant making it possible to elicit rich and credible data. This was especially relevant in a custodial setting where the autonomy of participants is deliberately restricted. These shifting power imbalances gave way to a range of additional ethical responsibilities of research with participants who have already experienced challenging social, economic and educational circumstances leading up to their incarceration. This article contributes to a reframing of the notion of being ethical and suggests ways of reconciling the dilemmas of research with participants in challenging contexts. These include extending a researcher's ethical responsibilities to beyond the research and the use of the researcher's greater power to advocate for less powerful participants. The use of CHE and other rapport building techniques to improve data elicitation gave way to further ethical responsibilities. Guidance on how to reconcile these is little explored.

As we move further into sophisticated methods of qualitative data collection, the more likely we are to face additional ethical responsibilities which go beyond the research itself. Some would argue that this is not the job of researchers, however researchers are not neutral, value-free objects but carry with them power to give voice to the vulnerable. Greater awareness of these issues may stimulate further research further, thereby increasing methodological and ethical knowledge on under-researched groups.

Keywords: young offender education, ethics;

## **Introduction**

Innovative methods (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010; Nind et al. 2013) to elicit rich qualitative data with children or vulnerable groups are encouraged, but there is little about the added responsibility for this richer data. The paper considers the need to ‘reframe’ what it means to be ethical within and beyond a challenging research context with ‘doubly vulnerable’, ‘hard to reach’ participants (Moore and Miller 1999). Just as new technological developments in medical research open up new ethical dilemmas, so too do methodological developments in social research reveal new ethical responsibilities. This builds on Oakley’s (1981) earlier work that indicated a significant point in qualitative methodologies, highlighting the importance of ethical awareness and researcher responsibilities. The current paper extends these original ideas in the light of new and emerging issues stemming from methodological insights and broader research contexts. This paper draws on research that focused on engaging incarcerated young people aged 10-17 years with education and learning in a secure custodial setting in England as an especially challenging context and vulnerable participant group.

Young offenders may be considered ‘doubly vulnerable’ (Moore and Miller 1999, p.1034) because of their age and status as ‘offender’ making them susceptible to marginalisation. Young people in custody are also a ‘hard to reach’ group (Shaghghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh 2011; Sydor & BMid 2013) because of their (locked) physical and social location (Ellard-Gray et al 2015) with less autonomy than a child in the community. This combination presents considerable methodological and ethical challenges and dilemmas in qualitative research (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018a). The locked custodial setting means issues of access and stringent gatekeeping, informed and

voluntary consent, confidentiality, trust and of 'giving voice'. In addition, there is a question regarding the credibility of incarcerated participants (Waldram 2009) and power imbalances between researcher and participant (Kvale 2006).

Young offenders have a range of additional difficulties which make interview research more challenging. Many have complex needs arising through issues of family breakdown, poverty, social class and other circumstantial situations compounded by a higher prevalence of drug and alcohol misuse, higher rates of mental health problems and higher levels of learning difficulties (Chitsabesan et al. 2006; Hughes et al. 2015). Additional emotional problems (Abram et al. 2003), behavioural problems (Young et al. 2015), and language and communication difficulties (Snow et al. 2016) all present additional challenges for research – methodological and ethical.

These were navigated through the principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (Brown and Denahar 2017; Brown 2012; Brown and Reushle 2010; Reushle 2005). It meant a deliberate shifting of power imbalances leading to rich, in-depth data and knowledge on this little researched population and context. However, this then gave way to additional ethical responsibilities with the dilemma of how these then had to be reconciled.

Based on an ethnographic research design including semi-structured interviews as a key source of data, this paper seeks to explore these issues. It begins by outlining the principles of CHE followed by the research itself. It will then focus on how the methodological and ethical challenges were navigated through a shifting of power, using the conceptual framework of CHE. These gave way to further emergent ethical responsibilities that were not confined to research methodology boundaries. The paper discusses what it means to 'reframe' being ethical, both during and beyond the research

parameters and within these particular contexts.

### **The principles of CHE**

The interviews conducted for this research with vulnerable participants and their individual challenges and difficulties, combined with the nature of a secure, locked custodial context may be retrospectively described as having used the principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (CHE) (Brown 2012; Brown and Reushle 2010; Reushle 2005) as a framework to navigate the challenges. There is much literature on the ‘nuts and bolts’ of conducting interviews (Hammersley 2015; Low, 2013), the different types (Brinkman 2013), the devising of questions (Gill et al. 2008) and even the development of ‘rapport’ (Robertson and Hale, 2011; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). However, as Brown and Danaher (2017) argue there is limited literature on skills required to develop rapport for effective interviewing. There is an implicit assumption that researchers who choose to conduct an interview will already have the necessary emotional intelligence and skills for rapport building (Gill et al. 2008). There is even less literature on how to manage the additional ethical responsibilities of data generated as a result of such interviews, particularly if one’s ontological commitments are underpinned by empowerment of the marginalised or oppressed (The critical realist positioning of my research is documented in a forthcoming paper). Troyna (1994), however, challenges the casual use of the notion of empowerment through research and instead prefers the term ‘critical social research’ as a means of uncovering the underlying structures causing inequalities and what can be done about them. Whilst Troyna (1994) pointed out that, an emancipatory intent does not guarantee an emancipatory outcome. Nevertheless, this should not detract from one’s intentions and it should be noted that empowerment need not be grandiose but can be quite local and

modest, for example, being able to express one's emotions or opinions within one's immediate context.

It was against this background that Brown et al (2017) posited the principles of CHE as a set of tools for 'rapport building'. For incarcerated young people, this is essential, not least because they are often suspicious of adults who attempt to build any sort of relationship (Cain and Cursley 2017) and particularly as they are unfamiliar with research and what it means. The quote below indicates how Tabitha was confused and suspicious of my intentions, at one point believing me to be a spy.

*'What even are you? Why do you come here?'* (Tabitha, aged 14)

Their caution and reticence in engaging with research means the credibility and trustworthiness of incarcerated people is often questioned (Waldram 2009). However, this is a failing in the researcher as if time and effort is made to build trust with interviewees, it is possible to develop rapport with even incarcerated young people. Indeed, if one is committed to ethical research, then this becomes an integral part of one's research repertoire. However, the embodiment of this is difficult when conducting research in the custodial setting which restricts such opportunities and structures interactions with those in custody (Bartlett and Canvin 2003; Cowie et al. 2007). It means that the researcher's skill in rapport building becomes even more important because it has to be done within these constraints.

Connectivity, humanness and empathy are ways in which this can be achieved. Connectivity refers to what may be described as 'initial rapport'. The general process of demonstrating one's privilege at having gained permission to access the participants' lives (Dickenson-Swift et al. 2007). With young offenders, access was granted through

the prison gatekeepers and the formal process of accessing secure settings which included Home Office clearance, the individual setting's management, the head of education and then finally permission from the young person. Thus, the rapport building for gaining access had several formal layers before reaching the young person, which has implication for genuine informed consent.

Humanness refers to the social nature of research interviews where there is an interaction between interviewee and researcher. It refers to information sharing (Johnson 2007) which is necessary for rapport building. In-depth interviewing with vulnerable groups involves the interviewer not just to 'hear' the participant, but also to 'share', especially one's own vulnerabilities and fallibilities (Johnson 2007) and links to the principles of humanness. This further develops the trust between interviewer and participant which can elicit deeper and richer data which the participant may not otherwise divulge or ever have articulated. Sharing one's own vulnerabilities as a learner contributed to this, such as the challenges I experienced as the child of immigrant parents where English was not my first language, helping build rapport so participants talked more openly. This was important not just in terms of ethics and research methodology, but in terms of reciprocal respect and understanding as individuals. Being mutual also meant that the power balance was more equal. Not attempting to balance the power dynamic means that the credibility and trustworthiness of the data is in question as the interviewee can either 'give you what you want to hear' or refrain from genuine engagement – both of these may render the data invalid (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen 2013). Hence, a rebalancing of power was essential for credible data collection. Having said this, when researching vulnerable participants with little voice, whatever the participants chooses to share with you has to be considered as valid. Who are we as researchers to claim that what they is said invalid?

Ethical research is about trusting participants in what they choose to tell you, rather than judge their credibility.

Empathy refers to the researcher's ability to completely immerse themselves in the participants' world and perspective. According to Watts (2008) this requires a significant amount of emotional intelligence to 'walk' with the participant as they speak about their experiences. This was especially essential in the secure setting in which reprimand is commonplace and the expression of inner voice and feelings is very much suppressed, as is autonomy and agency (Bartlett and Canvin 2003). However, empathy, without judgement (Dicken-Swift et al. 2007) is necessary to enable participants the space to articulate their deeper and inner thoughts, feeling and experiences – possibly for the first time on the particular topic in question.

Empathy was important not only to elicit data (Gair 2011) but to be able to critically analyse and interpret the data in a way that represented the perspective of the participant. In other words, to ensure the authenticity of the data and retain its deeper meaning which can often be lost in the analysis stage (Anyan 2013). Field notes which captured my memory and emotions taken immediately following interviews formed part of the data where aspects of the interview not in transcriptions were able to inform the analysis.

Being led by the principles of CHE framework facilitated data collection that may not otherwise have become available. This places an additional ethical responsibility on the researcher beyond that of data collection - an area that has not received much theoretical attention. The following section describes the research context and research design before exploring how the principles of CHE underpinned the methodological and ethical considerations in this research.

## **Outlining the research**

### *The Context*

There are currently circa 900 young people in secure custody in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Many young offenders enter the secure setting disengaged with education and learning (Cripps & Summerfield 2012; Little, 2015). Literacy levels are low, equivalent to that expected of primary age children of 7-11 years (Education Funding Agency 2012) with as many as 90% excluded from school at some point (Murray et al 2012; Little, 2015) and higher levels of learning disabilities (Chitsabesan & Bailey 2006). This suggests that the educational experiences of incarcerated young people are poor which can make engagement with educational opportunities challenging. In order to (re)engage young people in conflict with the law, there needs to be a better understanding of their engagement and disengagement which acknowledges previous educational experiences as well as the constraints of the secure context. This study therefore sought to explore the nature of disengagement in young people in secure settings and how they could be re-engaged with education and learning using a qualitative methodology.

In England and Wales, there are three main types of custody for children and young people, typically dependent on age. Young people aged 10-15 years are placed in Secure Children's Homes (SCH) those over 15 are usually placed in Young Offender Institutions (YOI) or Secure Training Centres (STC) for a Detention and Training Order (DTO). At present there are 605 young people under 18 in YOIs, 171 in STCs and 100 in SCHs (Ministry of Justice, 2016). The current research was conducted in a SCH in England which housed 24 young people. As all the residents were aged 10-17, the SCH provided 30 hours of statutory education with a dedicated Head of Education and

qualified teachers for English, Maths and Science, other subjects were taught by ‘instructors’.

There are many challenges in the education of young people whilst in a secure setting. They include: a youth justice system with both welfare and punitive elements (e.g. Case 2018); individual challenges (emotional, behavioural or learning difficulties) (as referenced above); previous (negative) educational experiences (Cripps & Summerfield, 2012; Little, 2015); complex social backgrounds (as referenced earlier); a lack of educational records (Ball & Connolly 2000; Smeets 2014) constrained resources and a workforce who may not be qualified teachers or trained to the needs of young people in custody (Jeanes et al. 2009). Combined, this research revealed considerable methodological and ethical challenges of researching this group.

### ***The Research***

The research was conducted over two main phases. Phase I explored how young people in secure custodial settings perceived education, school and learning in relation to their own lives. It involved 16 young offenders and data were generated through semi-structured interviews, observations and field notes, commensurate with an ethnographic research design. Phase II was concerned with the nature of dis/engagement in young people and the extent to which engagement with tasks that are authentic, relevant or perceived to have value, impact on engagement with education and learning within the secure context. This phase consisted of 5 individual case studies of 5 participants from the original sample of 16 and involved the use of Authentic Inquiry (Crick 2009, 2012b) as a means to re-engage learners. Authentic inquiry is ‘shaped by the learner’s interest, driven by her curiosity and purpose, yet is capable of supporting the delivery of the valued outcomes of a publicly accountable curriculum.’ (Crick 2009, p.73). Developed

as a pedagogical model which placed the learner at the centre, authentic inquiry acknowledged the place of externally recognised outcomes. An authentic inquiry typically starts with a concrete place, object or experience that is of relevance or importance in the life of the learner. Through the learning journey this can develop into, for example, a product, which can then be assessed. The product could be a poster, presentation, artwork, essay, poem or whatever is decided as relevant to the curriculum for the subject within which their inquiry might fall. Thus authentic inquiry offered a way to connect the participant's own interest and knowledge creation with formal education. Authentic inquiry has been shown to appeal to disengaged learners (Jaros & Crick 2007). The process provided a framework for data collection at various points offering insight into the nature of engagement.

Authentic inquiry, interview aids and importantly, the 'interview relationship' using the principles of CHE acted as a methodological tool to elicit rich data from a complex and challenging participant group within an equally challenging context. Developing such relationships not only meant navigating ethical challenges, but led to the emergence of additional ethical responsibilities. These methodological challenges and how they were overcome are outlined below.

### **Navigating methodological challenges**

There is a literature which documents attainment records, attendance records or reoffending rates (e.g. Wexler et al. 2014) as indicators of the poor educational experiences of incarcerated young people. However, these do not give much in the way of understanding the experiences and how they led to the outcomes reflected in attendance, attainment or reoffending figures. Qualitative approaches were thus imperative to the research aims.

The research interview was defined by Cannell & Kahn (1968) as a conversation initiated for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, determined by research questions. This assumes a participant will unproblematically engage with the research interview, however, the object of this research was learning, which is a difficult thing to talk about (Eraut 2007) and for this sample of participants, even more challenging. This is exacerbated because engaging with researchers is not something young offenders are accustomed to (Holt & Pamment 2011) with the language and vocabulary being unfamiliar or perceived as threatening (Wilson & Daly 2006). Moreover, the term 'interview' for this populations is associated with the 'police interview' (Sharp & Atherton 2007) which is confrontational and often a source of tension and hostility. Therefore, efforts to distinguish the 'research interview' from these interpretations of the interview were warranted. Interviews were hence called 'a chat with Adeela about learning and stuff' and contributed to the connectivity principle when conducting interviews with vulnerable participants.

The use of a range of visual aids, including graphic elicitation, arts based techniques and the photo elicitation technique (PET) supported data elicitation during interview. They are well documented methods for interviewing children and vulnerable participants but for the participants in this research, there was varied success in their effectiveness.

Graphic elicitation refers to the use of diagrams during interviews which can be created by the researcher or participants (Prosser and Loxley 2008). A relational/concept map was used as a form of graphic elicitation during interviews. Whilst useful for some participants, many chose not to engage in this activity. Reasons included the 'effort' involved in the task, lack of confidence and potentially not

understanding what was required. The response by Will encapsulated comments made by several participants.

*Do I have to do work?* (Will, aged 14)

Nevertheless, those who did engage in it, found it quite useful, though required considerable support in completing it.

*'Can you write for me...I don't write so good'* (Jack, aged 14)

With low to no literacy skills, anything that involved a writing instrument was perceived as potentially threatening, even when no actual writing was involved. To overcome this and, drawing on the principle of connectivity, I would be the 'scribe' for the activity. In doing so it was possible to develop the rapport so necessary in qualitative data collection

Arts based techniques have also long been used with children and young people (Finley 2008). Participants were asked to draw a self- portrait 'with the aim of encouraging participants' reflexivity and getting them to think holistically about their identity and lives' (Bagnoli 2009, p.549). Several of the participants engaged in this but again many did not want to draw.

*'That's too much effort'* (Damian, aged 14)

*'I can't draw'* (Bradley, aged 13)

*'I thought you said we were going to just chat'* (Josh, aged 16)

As before, techniques which required participants to use a pencil or other instrument were less successful. Additionally, there could have been a danger that

engaging in such techniques might reveal the participants perceived shortcomings and therefore for them, was not worth engaging in.

*'If I think I can't do something, then I just act up...so I don't have to do it. I don't want people thinking I'm stupid, do I?'* (Josh, aged 16)

In many ways the 'rejection' of these materials revealed data which were crucial to understanding participants' disengagement. Visual interview aids (Bagnoli 2009) similarly can open up the participant's interpretation of questions in an interview and in some instances convey what words cannot say (Eisner 2008; Gauntlett 2007) - as well as augment what words do say. Participants were asked to comment on images depicting engaged and 'disengaged' learners, thereby stimulating conversation. These were the most successful from all the techniques and aids used, possibly because less creative effort was required, including minimal instructions. It showed how a range of interview aids were needed to elicit rich data which may otherwise have not surfaced. These were used or discarded depending on the participant and in sum 'active' interview aids if not managed through the principles of CHE, could actually become a challenge in themselves.

Given these methodological challenges, creative questioning to facilitate deeper understanding of underlying values without being hindered by material interview aids were devised. These involved presenting a situation and asking them what they would do. Participants appeared intrigued and engaged with such questions, possibly because of their innovative and novel nature.

- i. Imagine you met an alien and he wanted to know the point of humans, what would you say?
- ii. Imagine you won the lottery and could do anything you wanted in your life -

what would you do?

- iii. Imagine if you had Mr X's job (secure unit head of education) or even Theresa May's (PM) job how would you make education or school better for kids?

Some were however threatened by such questions initially. Allowing the participant space to 'react' to the perceived threat and then persevere actually led to the collection of some rich data, reaching deep into the values of the participant.

*'He's [the alien] not human and he's just jumped out on me like that. He hasn't just walked up to me, he's jumped out on me. So I'd feel offended so I'm going to have to retaliate'* (Wayne, aged 14)

On further probing of this topic whereby Wayne, for example, was asked that once he had retaliated (beaten the alien), if the alien got back up and still asked the question, what would he do?

*'Then I'd answer him with my middle finger and walk off. I would tell him he should just go home, there is not much point being here'* (Wayne, aged 14)

*'I would say this world is messed up. It's all about money.'* (William, aged 15)

Drawing on the principles of CHE it was possible to elicit data that would otherwise not be revealed in the other methods. Other data generated as a result of such questions revealed that participants had quite conformist and traditional views on life and valued education, but disliked school as an institution. A traditional semi-structured interview with direct questions would not have lent themselves to such data. Participants engaged well with these questions, one even reported feeling 'light headed' following the interview:

*'Actually, I feel a bit lightheaded because I've never really talked about this. It's like a whole bunch of lead just taken off my shoulders.'* (William, aged 15)

In sum, it was found that for some participants, interview aids were a form of

distraction and an obstacle, perceived as ‘hard work’, potentially emphasising their limitations or vulnerabilities and thereby interpreted as being threatening or suspicious. It is thus argued that whilst the use of interview aids is advocated when interviewing young or vulnerable participants, they are by no means the panacea for credible data collection. Interview aids that were successful were those based on the principles of connectivity, humanness and empathy (CHE). This was particularly with the PET and the imagination questions. As a rapport had already been developed from earlier interactions, there was an existent connectivity, humanness and empathy within the relationships.

‘Successful’ methods were those which maintained the interest and engagement of the young person for the duration of the interview and where the young person did not choose to terminate the interview early or refuse to answer questions. Other than when asked to use writing instruments, no interviewee except one, who experienced significant mental health issues, terminated the interview. Within this context, the completion of an interview where the participant engaged with the interviewer and the questions was deemed a credible, trustworthy and rich dataset. The following field notes illustrate the engagement of Salem as he responded to a question on his educational experience.

*Initially, Salem was shy and would not make eye contact. He was a bit awkward. But as the interview went on Salem became more passionate in his answers, he would make eye contact. But before he did that he would ‘glaze over’ as he appeared to think deeply about the questions. (Field notes)*

Salem and other participants’ initial awkwardness demonstrated how they were unaccustomed to being the focus of attention (Liamputtong 2006) where their views were important. It also reiterated the valuable nature of the data with regards to its depth and my consequent ethical responsibility in how it was managed.

## **Navigating ethical considerations**

Some of the ethical issues in this research are inherent in any research with children and young people, but some are heightened due to the custodial context and the doubly vulnerable nature of the participants. These include giving voice to the young person, mitigating the lack of autonomy and power and consequent implications for voluntary consent and the right to withdraw from research. Each of these required navigating a challenging terrain and also drew upon the principles of CHE to support this.

Children are a less powerful group in society (Morrow & Richards, 1996) with regards to a voice due to structural inequalities (Liamputtong 2006). This is despite the UK's commitment to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC) articulated in Article 12, explicitly giving children the right to voice (Lundy 2007). This includes children who are incarcerated. Lundy (2007) presents a useful framework in the form of *space*, *voice*, *audience* and *influence* to enable the embodiment of Article 12. This framework takes account of how space needs to be provided for views to be expressed. However, important here is the notion of audience and influence because this then places responsibility on adults to be an active audience where the view has influence. In this way, Lundy enables practitioners to avoid using the principles of Article 12 in an arbitrary way 'tick box' way. Instead, the views of children have potential for effect.

However, when children are given voice, it is re-presented through adults, often to serve or evidence adult interpretations of a child's world (James 2007). Even the term 'giving voice' is indicative of the power relations between adults and children in that children can only have voice when adults 'give' it to them. There is little getting away with this power imbalance in the context of this research, however, gaining trust

through using the principles of CHE contributed to rebalancing this to be able to elicit rich and purposeful data. Lundy (2007) presents a useful framework in the form of *space, voice, audience* and *influence* in which to enable the embodiment of Article 12 of the UNCRC

For incarcerated young people, permissions of more powerful agents and institutions are required before access is granted (Heath et al. 2007). This has implications for gaining trust because asking for permission is a form of building trust. Trust is vital when researching vulnerable, marginalised and hard to reach populations (Liamputtong 2006) if data are to be trustworthy, credible or valid. To mitigate this, a period of 12 months was invested at the secure unit so that participants could ‘react’ and respond to my presence before the data collection started. This period was used as a form of connectivity with participants, contributing to levelling the power imbalance between researcher and participants. For example, during lesson observations, I would sit amongst the pupils, carry out the work they were doing and ask questions of the teacher when an instruction was not clear. Although initially awkward for the young people, this served to position myself in a lesser authority than their teachers or security staff. It highlighted my own fallibilities in, for example, maths lessons where the young people would often ‘help’ me with the tasks – somewhat challenging the notion of ‘intelligent’ university researcher.

This process enabled the developing of trust which made obtaining voluntary and informed consent more ethical and direct. Developing trust also meant that the participants believed the interviews and other data collection methods to be related to the research and not their offence. Even then, it was necessary to explain the meaning of research as not many of the participants were aware of what it meant - recall the

comment by Tabitha ‘What even are you’?).

Despite the need to develop trust, it was important to remain separate from the secure unit and its regimes. This may seem like a paradox but it was necessary to maintain a distinction between roles e.g. the role of a researcher and not a member of the care, security or education staff as part of trust building and the mitigating of power relations. As I was not a young person who was incarcerated, from the view of the young people, I was on the other side i.e. authority. One way this was managed was by the avoidance of any keys which gave me access or exit from somewhere the young people could not go. For example, when exiting interview rooms, the participant was asked to organise this through whatever mechanism they usually used e.g. the pressing of the buzzer. This act placed them in control of my exit and of marking the end of the interview. I also concealed visible security, such as the alarm usually worn around the neck. Whilst being a requirement of entry by the secure unit, I wanted participants to believe I trusted them and so ensured the alarm always remained hidden. Using the principle of connectivity, this was another way to level out the power imbalance between myself as adult and researcher and them as young person and offender. However, at the same time, I had manipulated the situation to gain trust, ultimately, to access data. This in itself raises some questions, for example, I had ‘hidden’ keys - a form of deception - even though my intention was to even out power imbalances. Thus, in trying to solve one ethical issue, there is the danger of creating another and it is for the researcher to consider which is most appropriate in a given situation. Such ethical dilemmas are not easily resolved via procedural based ethical approaches, but rather by reflecting and assessing the context at that moment in time. This has to be combined with a realisation that not all ethical dilemmas are necessarily resolvable.

Voluntary and informed consent is a standard expectation in social research.

Given the nature of the setting it was likely that participants believed they were obliged to participate (Alderson & Morrow 2006) and so ascertaining genuine consent was not easy. The diverse range of understanding, enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the research and the extent to which they were genuinely informed was also questionable, if even possible. The gaining of trust is most likely to form the basis of genuine consent, though this does not necessarily guarantee free and informed consent for the reasons above. Further, the nature of the secure setting is one of based on compliance which. Even so, some participants did refuse consent, which means they must have felt able to.

The humanness principle contributed to this as during interviews a level of self-disclosure levelled out the power imbalance (Johnson 2007), creating a space to refuse participation. Indeed, some participants from Phase I declined to participate in Phase II which indicated that they felt able to do this without any consequence. A context of trust and consent in such a challenging environment was essential in the collection of rich and credible data.

All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and maintain anonymity. Wiles et al (2008) reported how researchers use a range of methods to protect the identity of their participants, including changing key characteristics or even omitting data that might identify them. In this research, the participants were less aware of the need to be anonymous, though the secure unit were rightly concerned about this and steps were taken to ensure all data was anonymised as soon as it was collected. The generating of rich in-depth data heightens the risks of identification and means that protecting becomes even more important.

This did present an ethical challenge when one participant who had written an autobiography to be included in my doctoral thesis insisted on his real name being featured. Whilst it was important to honour his wish, it compromised anonymity. Ultimately, as the 'powerful adult', I decided not to use the participant's real name, thereby, (somewhat reluctantly) exercising my greater power. This decision was based on the reasoning that inclusion of the real name could potentially 'follow' the young person later in life when he may have moved on from his time in custody. I did not feel that he had the 'capacity' to think about his future in the way a 'more experienced' researcher and adult like me could. This was a dilemma, navigated by exercising my greater (adult) power which I did in the spirit of managing my ethical responsibility towards the young person and their future. It could be argued that I had no right to do this because I had shifted the power balance back in my favour, having balanced it out in order for the participant to even write the autobiographical piece.

Having developed relationships with participants, there also has to be a point of departure. The literature on gaining access to research sites is plentiful, but literature on exiting the site is much less attended to (Delamont 2002), but is especially important when relationships have been built (Reeves 2010). This was overcome by a gradual exit by ensuring regular but more spaced out visits to the site until all interviewees who had participated in the in-depth authentic inquiries had left the unit. Despite this, it still represents an ethical dilemma because even for a researcher it is not easy to detach yourself from people who you have come to know and understand. In some ways this challenges the connectivity and humanness principle which had been invested in for data collection where, as this goal is achieved, the researcher decides when to exit the research site, thereby re-shifting the power balance back in their favour. It was such shifting power relationships which gave way to new ethical responsibilities.

### **Shifting power relationships giving way to new ethical responsibilities**

Using the principles of CHE contributed to rebalancing the power dynamics between researcher and participant making it possible to elicit rich and credible data. This was especially relevant in a secure custodial setting where the autonomy of the participant is deliberately restricted (Bartlett & Canvin 2003). However, the shifting power imbalances through CHE gave way to a range of additional ethical responsibilities. This was especially so because of the doubly vulnerable nature of the participants - many who had already experienced challenging social, economic and educational circumstances leading up to their incarceration and possibly continue on release. Becoming connected, sharing humanness and being empathetic meant it was not possible to just stop as the interview and research ceased. Research where one has been truly empathetic can lead to a sense of discomfort (Gadd 2004) and a sense of inadequacy and humbleness at the privilege (Watts 2008) of sharing some deep and intimate aspect of participants' perspectives. This was particularly poignant in this research from which there emerged new ethical responsibilities that were perhaps not viewed as such before the research.

This is because ethical considerations tend to be considered in methodological and procedural terms. Ethical regulation is an institutional feature of most research institutions, which can sometimes risk removing responsibility of the researcher to be naturally ethical and establish genuine trust and confidence with participants (Allen & Israel, 2018). Nevertheless, in recent times, being ethical is viewed as a process rather than a product (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018b) because social research is largely based on relationships and trust (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan 2002). However, I would add responsibility for data gathered is a crucial part of this process, going beyond procedural ethics. Procedural ethical procedures may not necessarily help with ethical dilemmas in

specific research. Iphofen & Tolich (2018a) also call for engaged researchers to be more aware of the implications of their research, beyond procedural measures. In navigating the challenging methodological and ethical terrains and having used shifting power imbalances for the benefit of my research I found myself amidst an array of further ethical challenges and dilemmas, despite having ‘fulfilled’ my ethical obligations.

Firstly, whilst engaging young people for the benefit of the research, there was little mechanism for offering further education and learning opportunities on release or within the secure setting. Having successfully engaged the young people during the research (see Ahmed Shafi, 2018), there was nothing to further the work they had begun or connect it to what was available in the secure unit. Through developing relationships and building trust, it would be fair to say that the young people may have had an expectation from me. The following quote by Andrea indicated her disappointment at not being able to complete her authentic inquiry, by downplaying the work she had put in. Andrea had developed expectations of how she could benefit from participating in the research and which has further ethical implications.

*‘It’s only a notebook. It’s only writing. It’s not like I had a job interview and that. It’s just that page I could write anything I wanted, but the thing is, like, if she [her mentor] – there could have been something out of it rather than just doing like 13 pages of writing and then not doing nothing [...] the plan was to go and have a look on the computer and see what jobs there are that would interest me. Obviously that hasn’t happened so I just thought it was a waste. I haven’t been bothered doing it again because I thought, ‘what’s the point?’ (Andrea, aged 17)*

This indicates that ethics is not just about conducting research but also what is to happen after the research, thereby extending the responsibilities of a researcher. There are challenges in this because the researcher does not often have power beyond the research. For example, I would be limited in the extent to which I could have extended

opportunities to the young people, given the secure nature of the setting and the limits of my role there. In many ways, this added to my discomfort at having benefitted from the research encounter in terms of my data but my participants did not. This returned the power balance to the original situation where the incarcerated young person was the marginalised and less powerful and I the more powerful. Vähäsantanen and Saarinen (2013) argue that the research interview is not such an imbalanced encounter, arguing that the interview is a form of a 'power dance' where power flits between both researcher and participant throughout the interview. After the interview, however, power is though, returned to the researcher (Reinharz and Chase 2002) who then interprets, analyses and disseminates the data and which could differ from the participants (Vähäsantanen and Saarine, 2013). This indicates the complex interplay of power which is further highlighted in a secure custodial setting because power is more overt in presence. The inadequacy experienced as a result of not being able to do more translated into greater responsibility in sharing and elevating the voice of incarcerated young people.

The second ethical dilemma refers to whether the purposes of research justify the benefits of research against a short-term gain for the incarcerated young person. This dilemma is further exemplified because the gain for the researcher is considerably longer term. For example, in obtaining data, I was able to gain a doctorate, publish papers, present at conferences and gain recognition for the work. These same direct benefits did not extend (to my knowledge) to the participants. This further highlights the power imbalance and despite aiming to be ethical during the research and making efforts to level out power imbalances, these were to benefit the research. It could be argued that the dissemination of the research could have indirect benefits to the participants and thus the research is worth the short-term benefits. My professional

benefits had extended beyond that of my participants, placing an ethical burden upon me.

The third ethical challenge emerging from the shifting power relationships was the existence of myself as yet another adult in the long line of professionals that have come in and out of the short lives of the participants. It meant that in some ways, I was just another adult making unfulfilled promises. Another adult who let them down. This is a responsibility that weighs heavy, especially as during the process of empathy principle in interviews, there is a development of a relationship which means you have shared a part of the participant's life. Not being able to make changes for them feels like a betrayal of their trust and places an ethical responsibility on me to do more with the research than I may have intended at the outset. This reframes the idea of being ethical to beyond the parameters of the research.

Thus, although my interview strategies had been 'successful', the research had not necessarily been successful for the participants in an equivalent way. The nature of the study nor my own sense of ethical responsibility could accept this as sufficient. It highlighted how if new methodological insights and tools are enabling the generating and unearthing of data richer than ever before, then it is reasonable to consider the additional ethical responsibilities this brings in a more deliberate way.

### **Reframing 'being ethical'**

The additional ethical responsibility which emerged during the navigating of methodological and ethical challenges, having utilised, for example the principles of CHE, means that there was a need to reframe what it meant to be ethical when researching doubly vulnerable participants. To be truly ethical is to continue one's ethical practice beyond both the research setting, the interaction with participants and

general methodological process (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018a). It involves handling the additional or richer data more responsibly, disseminating it sensitively and using it not merely for research purposes, but to elevate the voice of those (participants) with less power. In some ways this relates to Lundy's (2007) framework for Article 12 of the UNCRC, whereby it becomes my responsibility to elevate children's voice to an audience in order to influence. Thus, in essence, it is not good enough to utilise the data to further knowledge alone. It has to also benefit the individuals who contributed to it. Just as one would not expect participants of medical research to merely contribute to the development of a new drug (as an example), we should not expect (vulnerable) participants of social research to simply contribute data. They should have some benefit from the research, both the process and its dissemination or other use.

In this research, there were several attempts to reconcile the dilemmas of having elicited rich in-depth data. Despite the ethical challenges of using a participant's story in my thesis, it was important to respect the participant's choice to be featured and in his own words and handwriting. Having his story as the opening of the thesis privileged it over my research story and foregrounded the challenges of the lives of many young people who offend. In this way, I was able to use my thesis as a platform for the participant to have a voice where there would be an audience, and possible influence (Lundy, 2007). Whilst limited, this was a symbolic way in which the participant's voice was elevated more than it would have been otherwise. Others used their participation in the research in their CVs.

Mann (2002) posited that research ethics committees should have a role not just in the research process but also in dissemination activities. Whilst he was referring to the ensuring of the dissemination of clinical trials and did not extend to social research, it

suggests that there have been calls for research ethics to also cover dissemination. In social research the additional ethical issues that new qualitative methodological insights uncover through the generating of novel data have yet to be addressed. There is little guidance on how to ensure responsible ethical management and dissemination of such data.

Whilst dissemination of research is a part of its purpose, the additional ethical responsibilities resulted in me becoming a more passionate advocate of my findings in terms of sharing with policy makers and decision makers (Rousseau & Kirmayer 2010). This was fuelled by an overwhelming desire to give voice to the doubly vulnerable as a way of reconciling the greater power I had over them. Nevertheless, this should not dampen ones intent and dissemination moved towards effecting change, positioning the research strategically in front of decision making audiences, such as policy makers, as well as regular academic dissemination. Lundy (2007) would argue that this is an important aspect of our responsibilities within Article 12 of the UNCRC concerning *audience and influence*.

Ensuring data were not fractured data (Denzin & Giardina 2016) during dissemination and that meanings shared during data collection were not lost is another way to ensure ethical practice beyond data collection. The power over the data at this stage is firmly within the remit of the researcher and participants are rarely part of the dissemination process. Thus, ethical considerations during the research process should extend beyond process and into dissemination. Institutions could consider incorporating this into part of the ethical regulations to which researchers adhere to support embedding this into their practice. Unethical use of data following collection could be a greater and unprotected area of risk than ethics during the research process itself.

## **Conclusions**

This article contributes to the reframing of what it means to be ethical and suggests ways of reconciling the dilemmas of research with participants in challenging contexts. Greater awareness of these issues may stimulate further research, thereby increasing methodological and ethical knowledge on under-researched groups. Despite the ethical challenges and dilemmas, the way to reconcile this is to carry the responsibility rather than be weighted by it. To view the position as privileged and that even if the young people have less voice, in participating in the research, somebody is amplifying it.

The literature on conducting interviews in order to elicit credible and trustworthy data is well documented and the principles of CHE add an important contribution to this in terms of the skills a researcher needs in order to do this. However, how the use of CHE and other rapport building techniques impact on the ethical responsibilities of the research and then how to reconcile this is little explored. As we move further into sophisticated methods of qualitative data collection, the more likely we are to face additional ethical responsibilities which go beyond the research itself. Some would argue that this is not the job of researchers, but it is, because researchers are not neutral, value-free objects but carry with them power to give voice to the vulnerable.

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