

# Surviving research on sensitive topics with young offenders

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## **Abstract**

Engaging young offenders in research on sensitive topics can pose many obstacles, especially for novice researchers. This article reflects on some challenges experienced in approaching children and young people in prison settings using either quantitative or qualitative approaches, mainly drawing on a recent project on bullying and victimisation in Malaysian juvenile justice institutions. The primary aim is to share practical challenges raised during the fieldwork and explain how these were handled in appropriate ways. The article discusses initial efforts, including issues in gaining access and the importance of conducting a pilot study. Included in this article are challenges related to how the researcher maintains field relations, manages the survey, and survives during the interviews.

## **Keywords**

Young offenders, prison fieldwork, sensitive topics, mixed-method

## **Engaging the young offender on sensitive topics**

My principal research interests are in children's and young people's experiences of violence and victimisation in penal institutions. Taking part in research of this nature can be very sensitive, as it potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved (Cowles, 1988; Sieber & Stanley, 1988; Dickson-Swift, James & Liamputtong, 2008). The research could be perceived as threatening; first, it studied deviance, which exposed something bizarre and bad about the moral status of the signifier (Goffman, 1963). Second, the study involved children and young people who are experiencing unequal power relations, and much of their lives is controlled and limited (Punch, 2002). Third, the research dealt with areas that are private and potentially volatile places (Liebling, 2004). Next, research investigated the interests of the political climate (Lee & Renzetti, 1990), where the study touched on the exercise of punishment on young offenders and specific descriptions of the moral performance of the Juvenile Justice Service in Malaysia where the research was conducted. Therefore, the results of the research may be controversial, as it favours one faction over another (Record, 1967). Finally, research can be very sensitive, as it potentially exposes the researcher to physical, mental, or emotional strain

(Liebling, 1999; Jewkes, 2014). Nonetheless, the level of sensitivity of the topic may vary in different groups of people. As Sieber (1993) argued, the gatekeepers, ethics committees, researchers and participants may all perceive the risk differently, as this perception is highly subjective. Even different gatekeepers may perceive risk differently. In a recent project, I was required to submit details of proposed research to two different Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). One IRB expressed no interest in participating in this study, as it felt that the topic proposed was too sensitive. The study had been seen as a 'threat of sanction', as it may reveal information that is stigmatising or incriminating for especially young offenders in some way (see Lee & Renzetti, 1990). In contrast, the other IRB agreed to participate, as they believed that:

This research is necessary for exposing us (the authority) to the current situation in institutions throughout Malaysia (...) and we hope this study may bring some changes to juvenile institutions for the sake of our (institutions') future.

In this circumstance, the study was seen as a consequence of the institutional pressure to deliver broader juvenile justice system change, rather than to meet offender needs. Further, and more crucially, this study attempted to meet offenders' needs by providing opportunities for them to express their views. In the penal system, how young offenders are heard and feel can be neglected (Holt & Pamment, 2011) due to a lack of resources and personal autonomy (Bartlett & Canvin, 2003). For Becker (1996), those who have gained more resources and autonomy (those at the top) are seen to be more credible than those who have little status in society (the underdogs). Indeed, the underdogs may be completely discredited and pathologised, and they often do not have a voice at all. It may be the researcher's task to challenge the 'hierarchy of credibility' by helping the marginalised underdogs to find a voice. In this study, therefore, the researcher gives more credence to young offenders, who are marginalised and have less power, in order to uncover meaning, perception, and values in relation to their incarceration experience.

Concerning the balance between the sensitivity of the topic proposed and the benefits of undertaking such research, I was convinced to carry out studies focusing on young offenders. The more sensitive a topic is, the more it needs to be studied. It may be the researcher's responsibility to be more aware ethically and practically during the fieldwork. During the proposal development phase, I did a thorough examination of the issues surrounding this topic. It should be noted, however, that some issues are not always apparent at the outset of the research. As Cowles (1988) stated:

Although aware of some potential problems related to the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the subjects, I was admittedly very

naïve about the actual sensitivity and how the study activities would influence both the subjects and myself (p.164).

## **The initial efforts: Gatekeeper and the pilot study**

In the recent project, data were collected over a period of four months, beginning with a survey study on 289 offenders in eight juvenile institutions and followed by in-depth interviews with 16 offenders and eight staff members in two institutions. In many situations, it is difficult to recruit participants for rare or deviant populations. In fact, this becomes even more complex in the case of incarcerated young offenders, as they have been exiled from the conventional world. Legal regulation causes the greatest difficulty (Lee, 1993). In order to get access to juvenile institutions, I was required to submit details of the proposed research for prior review by a body charged with ensuring compliance with the law. At the time I submitted the proposal for this research, the political climate in the Malaysian Juvenile Justice System was somewhat unripe for this type of project. Revealing controversial stories behind prison bars can be easily denied, and being denied was a painful experience. However, there was a reasonable explanation for the situations I faced. For novice researchers who have less experience and power, it is crucial to consult with particular gatekeepers by discussing the topic of interest during the phase of developing the research proposal. The aim is primarily to be in a position to learn from them by getting feedback about the topic proposed and discussing the benefits of the research project. In general, acceptance of the proposal depends on a trade-off between the possible benefits and the possible nuisance of having a researcher around (King, 2000). Secondly, it aims to minimise rejection by building liaisons with community gatekeepers that can provide access to potential participants. Thus, developing good relationships with gatekeepers may ease accessibility to the research site. Nonetheless, one of the biggest hurdles experienced by most researchers occurs when gatekeepers delay or withhold information. Therefore, I began to plan to gain access as soon as the project started. Bear in mind that it often requires some combination of strategic planning, hard work and luck (Van Maanen & Kolb, 1985).

Furthermore, success in gaining entry does not guarantee the success of the research fieldwork. Research fieldwork accounts typically deal with such matters as how the emergent relationships with subjects were cultivated and maintained during the course of the study (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991), and the depressing time when the project seemed destined to fail where communication with the participant was at a low point (Freilich, 1970). Gatekeepers within institutions can be very helpful in recruiting participants (Davies & Peters, 2013). However, they are not always the appropriate entities to make the decision of whether someone is capable of taking part in research. Therefore, it is better to pilot test first than to take the risk (De Vaus, 1993, p. 54). In the recent project, I decided to conduct a pilot test to test the adequacy of research instruments. To

achieve this, the test was supplemented with additional methodological techniques, including the process of recruiting and approaching participants. Eventually, my attention moved to the practical problems in carrying out the piloting process. I discovered the recruitment approaches were less effective due to three central issues: the denial of participation, the disruption of institutional regulation and routine, and the researcher's inability to conduct the study. These issues forced me to supplement my main project with a second pilot study aiming to address the practical issues raised in the previous pilot test. The second pilot test was conducted to 'try out' the research process, including the different ways of approaching participants. Although this does not guarantee success in the main study, it does offer advance warning about where the main research could fail, where the main research protocols may not be followed, and whether the proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). The well-conducted pilot study informed me about the best research process; as a result, relevant aspects of the main study changed. This increased my confidence in carrying out the main project with a higher awareness of ethical issues.

## **Insider-outsider relations**

I came to the institution with a less clearly-defined role. Although the warden, a few guards and several offenders knew that I was a researcher, they did not know the exact details of my research plan. Some of them recognised me as a counsellor or volunteer who came to the institution to deliver a service. Whoever I was, to the institution community, I was an outsider. For the research, I went to eight juvenile institutions. During my first visit to each institution, I met the person in charge (usually the psychology officer), who made arrangements for me to carry out the fieldwork. I did not meet the wardens or receive tours of the institutions. Nonetheless, I believed that I was welcomed.

Establishing a basic level of relationship with the staff was not difficult. In each institution, I kept a low profile, accepted without complaint and followed the institution rules. Also, I attempted to reassure them that I was not there to criticise the institution administration but rather to discern the actual facts of institutional life from the standpoint of offenders. I found that these measures contributed to positive field relations. In contrast, establishing and maintaining field relations with young offenders is not an easy task. In the prison setting, the social relationship is somewhat characterised by domination, exploitation (Crewe, 2009), fear and loathing (Sim, 2007). As such, it can be difficult for an outsider to establish a relationship. It has been argued that trusting relationships between researchers and participants can ensure the trustworthiness of a report (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). One way I sought to gain rapport was by talking to young offenders informally for a while about aspects of daily life that we had in common. Informal communication creates no pressure and gives offenders a sense of power, both of which made them feel more

comfortable to have me around. When rapport is achieved, however, the relations with participants may be strengthened or weakened during the research project at various times. To maintain the relationship is to maintain the 'trust'. Related to security, the issue of confidentiality can break researchers' trust relationships with community participants (Norman, 2009). In particular, the trust may be weakened if the participants feel threatened or insecure about the information they have shared. Thus, I attempted to reassure them that all information given would remain anonymity and confidential, and I informed them regularly that they could withdraw at any time. Also, the friendships that developed from the initial contact between me and the participants strengthened the trust relationship. I kept myself at the same level as everyone around me by showing respect, giving attention, listening to them, smiling, and being 'cool'. As another strategic point in the maintenance of field relations, I offered assistance to some of the participants. This was done not by giving advice or therapy but by making interview sessions more therapeutic. While the relationships were strengthened and maintained, somehow these were not entirely appropriate. I felt that I was misrepresenting myself as a former prisoner, a charming young lady, and a saviour. Some offenders asked me to assist them in illicit activities. They asked me for money, cigarettes, and the use of my phone. They even asked for my phone number or Facebook information, and in some cases I felt that I was being sexually harassed. Also, they became emotionally dependent on me and began to hope for something that was beyond my capacity.

The field relations became more personal than is desirable for the development of insight and the maintenance of rapport. This type of outcome is affected by over-rapport. During the project, I spent a whole day in the institution, spending most of the time in contact with young offenders. I was accepted and even liked by them. However, being too approachable or too familiar with them led to a loss of distance (see Miller, 1952; Ballinger, 2008). The question arises of how to be close and friendly but at the same time professional. Limiting the duration of contact and reflecting on myself after each session helped me to survive the field relations appropriately.

## **The survey study and the flexibility**

In the recent project, I combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches so as to put the complex phenomenon of a penal setting into the terms of a more comprehensive causal explanation (e.g., Toch, 1977; Akers, Heyner, & Gruninger, 1977; O'Donnell & Edgar, 1998; Ross, Liebling & Tait, 2011; Liebling & Arnold, 2012). For the quantitative survey, I collected data about the trends of bullying behaviour and victimisation of 289 young offenders in eight institutions by distributing a set of self-completion questionnaires. This required a great deal of effort and time. During the pilot study, I realised that the questionnaire was too long and time-consuming. In the fieldwork, therefore, I divided the questionnaire into three parts and approached participants in a group of eight to

10 offenders. As the questionnaire divided, each group was approached at three different times to fill out one part at a time. This was done quite well, but it was still time-consuming. One of the biggest hurdles is the discussion of participants' capacity in answering the questionnaire. Some items or questions can be very tricky or incomprehensible for participants, and this required further explanation. Indeed, participants who have difficulties in reading and writing were unable to answer the questionnaire alone. In these cases, I attempted to read aloud the entire questions so as to engage participants in texts that they might not be able to read or understand, and gave further explanations for some questions through examples. As a result, the time spent for some sessions doubled from half an hour to an hour or longer.

Approaching offenders in groups was enjoyable but very challenging. In this situation, the offenders' traits and characteristics made the survey sessions difficult to control. Verbal abuse occurred frequently during the sessions, creating a tense environment. 'You're a fool!' and 'you're a bastard!' were common statements that I heard during the sessions. Although these statements were not directed at me, I was responsible for them. I did nothing to respond initially, as I thought the matter was not serious. Later, I discovered that I was causing trouble. One way I handled this was to carry out sessions with some offenders individually, without letting them know the reasons for doing this. Apart from this, some difficulties were related to my status as a female. Conducting survey with a group of young male offenders was emotionally disturbing as a result of the use of sexual remarks, innuendos and jokes in my presence. Such remarks did not occur frequently but were embarrassing and distracting when they did occur. I chose to ignore them or to respond in an offhand manner without letting them know that I was disturbed.

A further aspect is that the survey sessions were always disrupted by institutional routines or 'unexpected routines'. It was hard to assemble selected participants in each group at a particular time, as some of them were engaged with institutional activities. Some were unable to complete the questionnaire because they were unable to attend all three sessions. During the sessions, sometimes the fire alarm system would be tested or an emergency roll call would be called at the institution, requiring me to cancel the session. In addition, I had to deal with different institutions whose staff had different demands. I adjusted to at least eight different institutional cultures. Some institutions allowed for a longer stay than others. Some allowed me to carry out each session with only a very small number of participants, as they worried about my security; others asked me to do it with a large number, up to 60 offenders. These approaches seemed to be bound more or less by local cultures. In this respect, I had to rely on the staff's advice. The staff members, too, for the most part, were limited by the culture of their jobs, which were affected by organisational history, work atmosphere, and management style (see Gubrium, 1991). My pre-fieldwork experience got me bearing on these meaning in a

setting. I learned and experienced local cultures, and these affected the way I interacted in the culture and modified my behaviour when necessary during the fieldwork. In other words, I embraced flexibility. This helped me not just in maintaining the field relations and keeping the approval active but also in organising the data collection process and strengthening ethics.

## **Interviewing: Therapist, researcher or 'spy'?**

For qualitative interviews, I focused on very personal matters, including the individual's self, lived experience, values and decisions. I allowed young offenders to give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts, which would have been lost in the quantitative survey. I gathered stories from 16 young offenders and eight institution staff. Research interviews involved social interaction and were always followed by emotional reactions. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) argued that when people put their emotional upheaval into words, their mental and physical health changes markedly. For the young offenders, therefore, the interviews meant something different than the researcher anticipated. The structure of the research interviews came close to that of a therapeutic interview. Simply stated, the opportunity to tell their life story may have been therapeutic to participants. As Omar explained:

This is the first counselling session I have ever had since I came here (...) I like to talk like this, between you and me. Share about myself. I feel good then.

The therapeutic benefits of undertaking research interviews may be explained in two ways. First, by being given a voice, participants were given attention. Young offenders always feel a lack of emotional and social support during confinement due to the large proportion of inmates in the prison and the subsequent loss of contact with friends and family (Toch, 1977; Biggam & Power, 1997). Positive attention is regarded as support that can significantly lower the risk of psychological disturbance in response to stress exposure. Second, by looking back and sharing past experiences, participants were able to relieve the burden of unresolved pain or secrets, which include events or self-attributes that evoke embarrassment and disapproval. This disclosure facilitates a sense of resolution (Frank, 2002; Murray, 2003). During the interviews, these therapeutic benefits occurred unintentionally. I adopted no dual-role. For participants, however, I was more than a researcher. As a social researcher, I am not a 'machine' dealing with 'machines'. There were always mutual influences in the social interaction which I had no control over. In particular, there was always a reciprocal exchange (see Oakley, 1981, 2016). Most of the young offenders I interviewed were talkative in nature. They were enthusiastic about talking to me, even asking me personal or unexpected questions, such as 'Are you a former prisoner? Are you married? How old are you?' It was hard not to respond. One way I handled this was by smiling at them nicely and saying, 'Well, that is a

good question, but let's discuss it later'. Usually, by the end of the interview they had forgotten about the questions they asked, and therefore I did not need to answer them.

Apart from the therapeutic benefits, the idea of an interview appeared threatening to young offenders. Although I briefed them regarding anonymity and confidentiality at the beginning, for the young offenders, sharing stories about their experiences of bullying others was particularly political. They always thought that the information they gave me might be submitted to the administration and thus might affect their current sentence or restrict their access to opportunities that the institution made available. The presence of the digital voice recorder increased their anxiety. I was sometimes seen as a 'spy' working for the institution to uncover their secret activities. The staff, too, in some situations, viewed me as a 'secret agent' who worked for the government to evaluate the system. They felt concerned about disclosing potentially embarrassing information in relation to their ability to run the institution. They sometimes felt that certain questions were provocative, such as 'What do you think about punishing young offenders in the institution?' Presumably, they felt discomfort for two reasons; first, because punishing young offenders inside the institution is a wrong practice, and second, because they were concerned about information given by offenders that might contradict them. Thus, one of them said to me, 'You should not trust 100 per cent what they (the offenders) say to you. They like to make up stories' (Norman). These situations became highly sensitive because the issues discussed triggered a strong emotional response in the participants. When this happened, I quickly changed my tone of voice or body language, nodding and smiling to encourage them. Most importantly, I repeatedly reassured them (especially the young offenders) of the secrecy of the information given, and I always allowed them to take breaks or even terminate the interview if they so desired. Also, I avoided unstructured questions or follow-up questions in relation to certain issues.

In the in-depth interviews, participants were given considerable control over the course of the interview. As a researcher, I played an active role in the unstructured interview process, aiming to (1) explore further the significant events, (2) bring the participant back on track, and (3) neutralise participants' strong emotional responses. Nonetheless, unstructured questions can be very sensitive in nature. During the interviews, young offenders were often triggered about issues that they were not ready to share. For example, issues such as drug use or homosexual activities in the institution were often revealed by mistake. When such things occurred, participants were ill-equipped to deal with the intense emotional reaction accompanying the disclosure. For me, it was an important issue to explore, as it related to the topic being studied. Indeed, I wanted to ask more, but participants were often unhappy to reveal more information or simply refused to talk. At this stage, I let them decide. It is important to be guided by the participant as to what they are and are not willing



to address (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Through their facial expressions and tone of voice, I somewhat understood how they felt. To confirm, I asked them whether they were happy to continue with the topic. Some participants continued to uncover the issue, although sometimes became tearful. Some wished to remain silent, and I always assured them that they had the right to do so with respect.

## Conclusion

Researching sensitive topics with young offenders who are considered vulnerable was a complex, personal and intense task. The complexity occurred mostly during the early stages of my work and centred on the issue of establishing rapport. The personal matters appeared mostly during the interviews that involved the discussion of personal experiences and feelings, and these often elicited intense emotions from the participants. A good-quality pilot study might lessen these complexities. By offering an understanding of the practical or ethical issues that may arise and the appropriate boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship, the pilot study helped me to be prepared. The real lesson, however, occurred during the actual fieldwork. Throughout the work, I struggled to conduct the research ethically by following all the ethical principles. I tried my best to protect participants and to maintain appropriate field relations, but I still questioned whether I was doing it right. Perhaps, in some situations, what I did may come out all wrong in theory, but it works in practice. As long as no harm was done to the participants or to myself, and there were no complaints from the institutions, I believed that I was conducting my fieldwork appropriately.

## About the author

Nazirah Hassan is a PhD student in the School Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Scotland, on leave from the National University of Malaysia, Malaysia. Her research interests include institutional environment, adjustment and offenders' behaviour. She has research experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. During her undergraduate study, she conducted a quantitative research study on attitudes among school children in Malaysia. In her Masters study, she carried out a mixed method study on aggression and recidivism among incarcerated juvenile offenders in Malaysia. She has contributed a chapter titled *Juvenile Detention And Custody: Restore Or Hinder?* in a book published in Malaysia, *New Paradigms in Evidence-Based Social Work: Research and Practice*. Currently, she is working on her PhD project that focuses on bullying and victimization in eight Malaysian juvenile justice institutions. She completed her fieldwork recently by collecting the data through quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews. From this research, she gained experience of carrying out research on juvenile offenders and in working in juvenile institutions.

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