

Ethically sensitive research with 'children' and 'adults' in custody

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Author Biography

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter draws on data from young men¹ interviewed on two occasions; first as 'children' aged 17 years within juvenile Young Offenders' Institutions (YOIs); and then again as 'adults' aged 18 years within young adult/adult prisons about their experiences of transitions. Ethical reviews typically reflect age-determined constructions of child/adult status and those aged under 18 years are deemed to be more 'vulnerable', thus attracting more scrutiny from research ethics committees (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] 2020). This concern heightens the methodological difficulties of prison research, as incarceration renders children 'doubly vulnerable' (Jacobson and Talbot 2017). Such institutions may be obstructive and access must be obtained from a series of gatekeepers. Negotiating the balance between participants' rights and their best interests (Heptinstall 2000, Thomas and O'Kane 1998), along with gatekeepers' priorities can be challenging. This chapter outlines how tricky ethical tensions were balanced with participants' best interests in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN 1989). Despite the difficulties encountered,

¹Throughout the chapter, the term 'young people' is used. Although those aged under 18 years are by legal definition (Home Office 1933) and international frameworks (e.g. UN, 1989) 'children', many participants in this research rejected the latter term (see also Gooch 2017).

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the researcher (JP) took the view that there would be 'ethical implication[s] of NOT conducting the research' (Girling 2017, p. 38). The chapter offers recommendations for how researchers might conduct ethically sensitive research with similar cohorts of young people.

KEYWORDS:

1. Youth
2. Young adults
3. Imprisonment
4. Power relations
5. Gatekeepers
6. Transitions

INTRODUCTION:

The research discussed in this chapter was part of my PhD, which explored transitions between juvenile Young Offenders' Institutions (YOIs) and young adult/adult prisons in the UK. A mixed methods approach was used drawing on quantitative and qualitative survey data directly shared with me from over 100 of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) inspections conducted between August 2014 and July 2017², and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The survey data forms part of HMIP inspection process and contains self-reported information on prisoners' demographics, their personal circumstances and all aspects of day-to-day life (see HMCIP 2020, HMIP 2020). This data was supported by findings from 49 interviews with young people. The same cohort of young people (n=14) were interviewed at two stages: pre-transition as 'children' and post-transition as 'adults'³. Interviews with young people explored their pathways and experiences from juvenile YOIs to young adult/adult prisons. Stakeholder interviews (n=22) (e.g. those employed within juvenile YOIs and young adult/adult prisons or with expert knowledge of youth incarceration including academics, inspectors, and civil servants) were also conducted to explore their perspectives of these transitions. Interviews were conducted between April 2017 and March 2018. The chapter commences with critical consideration of age-determined constructions of childhood and adulthood, before outlining principles of ethical governance with incarcerated children and their impacts upon access and consent. Finally, the practical approaches taken to uphold ethical research within institutions, whilst engaging participants and acknowledging the role of emotions are outlined.

Age-determined constructions of childhood/adulthood status

There are 'intersecting (and occasionally conflicting) moral geographies of age, maturity, rights and responsibilities' (Girling 2017, p. 43) when conducting research with young people. Although varying capacity is acknowledged in research ethics reviews, these largely adhere to statutory defined age categories of 'children' (aged under 18 years) and 'adults' (over age 18 years) (British Society of Criminology 2015, ESRC 2020). Despite this, within the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales, young people can be held criminally 'responsible' from 10 years of age and upwards. Yet within the prison environment itself, children hold an inferior status as both minors and detainees, and thus

²Quantitative survey data included data from seven secure training centres (STCs), 14 YOIs, nine young adult YOIs, 13 female adult and 94 adult prison inspections. Free text qualitative comments made within surveys by those aged under 21 years were also included from three STCS, seven YOIs, three young adult YOIs, five women's and 35 adult prison inspections between January 2016 and August 2017.

³ One follow-up interview could not be conducted because the participant was released before it could be arranged.

considered vulnerable and in need of protection. Incarcerated children have broader complex needs alongside their child status, which means they are 'doubly vulnerable'⁴ (Jacobson and Talbot 2017). Many have experienced trauma, abuse, educational exclusion, and come from poorer socio-economic circumstances or local authority care (Goldson 2002, Green, 2019). Although professional codes of research ethics recognise prisons as 'sensitive' research settings (British Society of Criminology 2015, ESRC 2020), additional considerations apply in research with children (Girling 2017, Moore and Wahidin 2017). Indeed, ethics approval processes often foreground these children's vulnerabilities in different ways to that of research with adult prisoners, who are not positioned as equally vulnerable by virtue of their age alone.

Transitions throughout childhood are individualised and for those whose lives have faced (ongoing) disruptions, they can be chaotic and unpredictable (Parry 2006). There is now much evidence highlighting how neurological development and maturity continues into adulthood and up to the age of 25 years (Sawyer et al. 2018). Despite this, institutions continue to adopt inherent constructions of linear transitions into 'adulthood'. Independent inspections have heavily criticised penal operational structures for failing to address and accommodate the distinct vulnerability of young adults (Harris 2015, House of Commons Justice Committee 2016a) and the variability of their experiences. Whilst some guidance is in place (see NOMS 2012, YJB 2018), processes of transitions are beginning to attract critical attention from independent inspections, which highlight poor management often to the detriment of young people (CJI 2012, Harris 2015, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation 2016, House of Commons Justice Committee 2016a).

Ethics in research with incarcerated children

Prisons are complex and harmful institutions 'designed to expel and hurt' (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017, p. 131) and the complex needs of those held 'may be further compounded by both age and by the special gaze of a criminal justice system' (Girling 2017, p. 40). Despite an acknowledgement from the Ministry of Justice (2013) that those entering young adult/adult prisons are at greater risk of victimisation, there is limited provision for this population group (HMCIP 2015). Within institutions, judgments of vulnerability are typically made with blunt assessment tools, which do not fully account for the harmful implications of imprisonment (Goldson 2002, Gooch 2017). As one Inspector

⁴There is not the scope here to fully explore definitions of 'vulnerability' (see Goldson 2002, Brown 2011 for further discussion on the concept).

interviewed observed: '[staff] have a problem that everyone's vulnerable, so if everyone's vulnerable no one really is'. Because of this, vulnerability is often overlooked in institutions, with a lack of support available (Girling 2017). In line with HMIP (2015) ethics guidelines, all those interviewed were considered vulnerable and every effort was made to preserve their 'rights, privacy and dignity' (HMIP 2015, p. 4). I maintained reflexive research practice by demonstrating consistent ethical sensitivity towards all participants and being especially mindful of the prison context and participants' unique needs whether 'children' or 'adults' (Christensen and Prout 2002, Girling 2017).

Engaging participants in research can reflect unnecessary intrusion into an individual's life (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) – particularly when they have not requested the research. Researchers may feel a sense of guilt when encroaching on participants' privacy and by asking them to share their experiences (Goldson 2002, Heath et al. 2009). These experiences have the potential to re-traumatise participants (Waters et al. 2020) and thus trigger emotional and social harms during the course of the research. Despite (or perhaps because of) their vulnerabilities, I took the view of Girling (2017, p. 38) that there would be 'ethical implication[s] of NOT conducting the research'. However, specific ethical issues associated with research of this nature were encountered, and as the following sections highlight.

Negotiating access

The National Offender Management Service⁵ (NOMS) National Research Committee (NRC) must approve all prison research conducted in the UK. My first application for ethics approval was declined with a request for additional clarification about the resources required, the sampling strategy, and potential biases of the research. As suggested, seeking to conduct research with those held within institutions is difficult (Bryman 2012, Phillips 2012, Sloan and Wright 2015), highly bureaucratic (Moore and Wahdin 2017) and necessitates an ongoing process of careful negotiation with gatekeepers (Heptinstall 2000 Beyens et al. 2015). The first NOMS NRC application was rejected due to concerns about potential bias in the assumptions of the research, along with concerns about resource demands. Whilst the decision letter did not outline specific reasons for refusal, evidence pointing to the 'defensive' nature of NOMS and their practices (Haringey, cited in the House of Commons Justice Committee 2016b) may have had some influence. The second (successful) application underscored how the research sought to meet strategic objectives as set out by NOMS and attended to the concerns about resources demands. Following approval, further permissions from

⁵ Now known as, Her Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service [HMPPS]).

gatekeepers were required from each prison Governor and personnel within each institution who facilitated access to participants. The Governor at one juvenile YOI requested that I had a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check⁶ and similarly undergo the HM Prison Service vetting procedure⁷. Inevitably, these requirements brought about time delays and demonstrated differing institutional requirements to undertake the research (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2020). The NOMS (2014) NRC guidance stipulated that I had a formal obligation to report any child protection, safeguarding or illegal issues that emerged during data collection. All participants were informed of these requirements within participant information sheets, consent forms, and during verbal discussions prior to interviews.

Gatekeepers can have further power and control over the research environment (Alyesalo-Kussi and Whyte 2018) through the identification and selection of 'suitable' participants (Israel and Gelsthorpe 2017). Whilst gatekeepers have a duty of care (Heath et al. 2009), gatekeeping should be sensitive and not excessive (Biddle et al. 2013). Despite my requests, I was not informed about any potential participants being excluded from the study. I was also not made aware of the number of young people scheduled to transition from each institution⁸ and thus, unable to determine whether some young people had been excluded. I simply had to accept gatekeepers' decisions about young people's participation.

To avoid intrusion, interviews were scheduled in advance in line with each institution's regime. Because of this, some interviews were shorter in duration than desired. In one juvenile YOI, there was a three-month hold on interviews as transitions into young adult/adult prisons⁹ were stopped. The gatekeeper at the YOI informed me that the research held potential to, 'cause confusion' and 'unrest' amongst detainees. When transitions resumed, a number of young people (I was not informed of how many exactly) were transferred before I could arrange any interviews. Whilst the gatekeepers' may have been seeking to 'protect' young people at a time of transition, these practices did exclude some young people from the study, thereby denying them an opportunity to share their experiences (Israel and Gelsthorpe 2017).

⁶ A DBS check forms part of the UK's disclosure and barring service through which an applicant's criminal convictions are checked prior to volunteer work, employment or research.

⁷ The vetting procedure extends the DBS by conducting identity and security checks on an individual before they can work, volunteer or conduct research in a prison.

⁸ At the time of the research, 349 young people transitioned to the young adult/adult estate (YJB 2020).

⁹ I was informed this was due to pressures in the young adult/adult estate.

Interviewing young people pre-and post-transition was a unique aspect of the research and as such, participant retention in the study was key. Most importantly, I had an obligation to conduct the post-transition interviews as I had informed participants I would. Despite having their consent (as discussed in the following section), I was required to negotiate with new gatekeepers at each post-transition institution¹⁰. The process of contacting gatekeepers within each young adult/adult institution was challenging and triggered particular ethical complexities. For example, gatekeepers varied in terms of their willingness to inform me about the destination of each participant. Sometimes I was given a contact name within the young adult/adult institution, but rarely was I given email addresses. Young adult/adult prisons had fewer staff members', and none seemed to be aware of the research (the juvenile YOIs were under no obligation to inform them and I was not informed about where the young people would transition to until after they moved). I felt that the gatekeepers at young adult/adult institutions had limited investment in the research. When conducting post-transition interviews, none of the young people were informed of my visit, or they had been incorrectly informed about whom was meeting with them (e.g. some were told they had a legal visit). My relative powerlessness over access, coupled with poor communication with participants by gatekeepers, may have negatively affected young people's experiences of the research, but also raised concerns about the processes of informed consent.

Consent

Prisons, particularly those holding children, present contradictions between 'power, justice, authority and care' (King and Liebling 2008, p. 447). The governance of children, especially incarcerated children, means that adults often make decisions on their behalf. There are tensions between children's autonomy, their right to be heard, and gatekeepers acting in their 'best interests' (Girling 2017, Heptinstall 2000, Thomas and O'Kane 1998). As noted, in England and Wales children are considered to have the capacity to be held criminally responsible from age 10 years, yet capacity to consent to their own medical, dental or surgical treatment is granted at a much later age (16 years in some cases, otherwise 18 years) (Goldson 2013). Throughout the research, I formed the judgement that the within this research participants aged 17 years and above were competent to give their own consent (Girling 2017). The research ethics committee supported this decision. In this way, the research sought to acknowledge young people's rights to express their views as outlined in Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC

¹⁰ The fourteen participants across two juvenile YOIs transitioned to five young adult/adult institutions.

(UN 1989) and provide a meaningful opportunity to speak to those whose voices may have been otherwise 'ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past' (Byrne 2004, p. 182).

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Liverpool in February 2017. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) draw a distinction between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice'. The former highlights the more formal approach to how informed consent will be ensured as part of the ethics approval process, and the latter reflects the complexity of seeking consent in the field (see also Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2020, Robinson 2020). Jewkes and Wright (2016) have suggested that the prescriptive nature of ethics committees can overlook important issues such as whether participants can make sense of relevant written documentation. Young people have varying levels of educational attainment and participant information sheets need to be written in an accessible style (Heath et al. 2009). Furthermore, obtaining consent can be hard for those who are confused or traumatised (Bosworth and Kellizi 2017). In this study, gaining consent via gatekeepers was further problematic since young people may have felt compelled to participate or unable to withdraw (Heath et al. 2009). Because of these concerns, I reiterated the relevant study information to clarify participants' understanding of the study and reminded them of their right to withdraw at any point. I was keen ensure that I obtained fully informed consent and provided opportunities for dissent, highlighting participants' power over their own decision making and involvement in the research (Heath et al. 2009). Consent was thus viewed as an ongoing, negotiated process (Neale 2013) and was especially important in this context as prisoners typically have limited control over their circumstances (Sloan and Wright 2015).

Ethical research in the prison environment

From entry into institutions, young people are subject to numerous assessments regarding their personal circumstances by unfamiliar adults (Goldson 2002, Ellis 2018). I remained mindful that participation in the research should provide an opportunity to share their experiences and should not compound the harms of imprisonment by mirroring such assessments. I did not want to be 'voyeuristic' (Moore and Wahdin 2017) through detailed personal questioning. Instead, interviews were deliberately designed to avoid discussion of sensitive or distressing topics, although I was acutely aware of the possibility that participants may divulge upsetting information. I could not predict with any degree of certainty the impact of the research upon them. I was mindful to recognise signs of potential harm to participants (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017) and that some participants might require

support beyond my role as a researcher (Byrne 2004, Jewkes and Wright 2016). Responding appropriately through ceasing the interview, for example, and providing details about support services were part of my ethical practice as a researcher.

As suggested, young people and prisoners are often situated as 'lesser social objects' (Crewe 2009, p. 161) and 22% of young people in YOIs report that they have no one to turn to if they have a problem (Green 2019). By positioning young people as social actors (Christen and Prout 2002), I sought to achieve a positive research experience and relationship with me, an adult researcher (Urry, Sanders and Mumford 2015). On one occasion, when asking Darren's¹¹ (aged 17 years) opinion, he responded by suggesting that sharing it would not make a difference. Whilst not wishing to dismiss his comment, I stressed to him that I was genuinely interested in hearing his views and experiences (see Biddle et al. 2013, Heath et al. 2009, Moore and Wahdin 2017). This commitment to the research triggered a sense of personal responsibility and the importance of providing an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was thus a crucial part of this process and in particular, for securing participants' trust and willingness to speak openly with me about their experiences and transitions (Waters et al. 2020).

The nature of prison research meant that gatekeepers' decisions and operational facilities often dictated the interview environments. Anonymity was problematic, as officers were required to escort the young people to meet me (Robinson 2020). As staff members had to be nearby for safety reasons, they were visible at times and were heard in the background. On one occasion when conducting an interview in a YOI, a staff member knocked on the door to check whether I was okay. Their motivations for doing this may have been out of genuine concern for my security or welfare (Jewkes and Wright 2016), yet these examples also reflected how the power and position of gatekeepers can unsettle or distract the young person being interviewed. On five occasions across both juvenile YOIs, staff maintained that it was necessary that they were present during interviews. This same issue was not experienced at the young adult/adult estate and perhaps, in part, reflected differences in treatment between children and adults. Whilst I had little choice but to be guided by their advice, I was conscious of the impact this might have on participants. I asked young people if they were comfortable that staff were present, and they confirmed their agreement. Yet, the very presence of staff members meant that it may have been difficult for them to say otherwise; once again reflecting how the

¹¹ All young people were given pseudonyms.

research context can trigger additional difficulties for young people to express their dissent or refusal to consent (Bourke and Loveridge 2014). I was thus highly mindful of the need to observe any possible signs that the young person may have been uncomfortable and avoided questions that might trigger discomfort and, if necessary, offer to end the interview (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry 2012).

Interviews were held in different spaces within the YOIs and young adult/adult institutions. Providing a 'neutral' physical space in which interviewees feel comfortable is often preferable. However, in the prison context, I was required to adhere to the safety and security advice of each institution. The most welcoming were the education spaces in YOIs, which were larger rooms and probably the least 'prison like' with windows. Other interview rooms were barren and located on the wings where other young people could be heard shouting, although the interview itself could not be overheard. The majority of young adult/adult institutions requested that I conducted the interviews as 'legal' or 'official' visits as they did not otherwise have resources to facilitate them. These were typically held in box rooms allocated for one-to-one visits with basic hard furniture, a desk separating myself and the young person, and a viewing window on the door for officers outside. Three interviews within one young adult/adult institution were held close to the official visit hall and whilst family visits were being held. At other times, legal visits were being held on the next table, and subsequent participants were brought to wait for their interview at once, thereby affecting confidentiality within the institution.

These instances presented issues of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity (Liebling 1999, Jewkes and Wright 2016) as other participants (and other individuals) were aware who was being interviewed. As an external researcher, I had little ownership or control over the interview space and the potential discomfort or emotions this may have evoked in the young people. Although they did not appear to be uncomfortable, I continued to remind them that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and moved the dictaphone nearer to them to minimise any prospect of their responses being heard by others.

Engaging participants

As an outsider, building a suitable perception of each prison's culture and environment was difficult (Bosworth et al. 2005, Phillips, 2012). I was honest about my understanding of the prison setting and, if I was unsure about a particular term, acronym or situation, I sought clarification from the interviewee. When appropriate, and in an effort to reduce formality, I adopted some commonly used

terms in the prison setting (Jewkes 2011) such as 'pad' rather than 'cell'. Similarly, I was aware that the young people had varying stages of emotional, cognitive, and social development. I thus adapted my style to each individual by building an impression of their capacity and competency within informal opening conversations (Health et al. 2009) and applying this to my interview technique. For example, I would say, 'my ethnic origin is white British, what is yours?' This approach, among others, sought to reduce any embarrassment experienced by the participant if they did not understand the questions I asked.

My own ethnicity, gender and age are 'non-negotiable' ascribed characteristics (Walsh 2004) and I cannot judge how these characteristics influenced engagement. As a white British¹², female, aged around 10 years older than male participants, it is very possible that participants found it difficult to relate to me, or indeed it affected the ways I engaged with them and their experiences (Liebling 1999, Phillips 2012). Inherent power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (King and Liebling 2008) meant that, despite best efforts to build rapport (Mitchell, Jones and Renema 2015), and reduce power imbalances (Liebling 1999, Phelan and Kinsella 2013), the young people inevitably occupied a subordinate position (Urry, Sanders and Mumford 2015) and one that was exacerbated by the prison context. Practical difficulties accessing institutions, prison regimes and staffing pressures restricted the time I had to conduct interviews and build relationships (Liebling 1999). Despite these constraints, during time spent with participants outside of interviews, I chatted with them about other topics (e.g. football) in an attempt to establish rapport. Within these discussions, I hoped to help the young people feel 'a bit more like a human being and a bit less than a prisoner' (Bosworth et al. 2005, p. 258).

These examples reflect some of the broader ethical tensions encountered when conducting prison research within a limited timeframe (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2020). Whilst I closed the pre-interviews by mentioning the post-transition interviews (and thereby signalling a further meeting), ending the second interview felt more abrupt. Although I could only refer young people to the debrief sheet for support, I was unsure about how to appropriately close the interviews and demonstrate genuine care for their wellbeing, particularly when some had disclosed their concerns about their future prospects. Whilst there is often much investment in securing access to the research field and

¹² Of the fourteen young people I interviewed, nine were white British, three were black British, one British Muslim and one was white mixed Caribbean. I adopted the HMIP (2020) criteria for ethnic groups for consistency across data sets.

building relationships with participants, 'leaving the field' is often an afterthought (Sloan and Wright 2015). Considerations of the lasting effects of research upon participants are important, especially with imprisoned young people who are likely to have had numerous disrupted and negative relationships (Harvey 2012). Furthermore, upon transition, the participants had lost relationships between institutions and services, as they were no longer entitled to these as 'adults' (HMIP and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2019). Although I returned to one juvenile YOI to provide feedback to operational staff, I do not think my findings were shared with the young people. In their research with young prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment, Crewe, Hulley and Wright (2020) wrote an annual card to participants to inform them of their research findings. Despite being a time-consuming exercise to locate participants, upon reflection, such an approach may have been appropriate (Allen 2016) and to ensure the ethical dissemination of research findings back to participants.

Emotions

Impressions and representations of participants (Phelan and Kinsella 2013) can be affected by status and role (Moore and Wahdin 2017). Within prisons, young men often seek to demonstrate self-preservation through 'toughness, strength and masculinity' (Claes et al. 2013, p. 62) and by distancing themselves from any notion of weakness or vulnerability (Crewe 2009, Laws and Crewe 2016). I was aware that these portrayals, or constructed identities of how they wished to be understood (Phillips 2012), represented their relationship with their social worlds (Hammersley 2003). I wanted to explore their views and often used open and hypothetical questions to remove reference to the first person (Crewe et al. 2014). I found this technique to be effective, particularly in the case of Noah (age 17 years), who otherwise showed much 'bravado'. In the below example, he was very forthcoming about his concerns:

Researcher: If you were in charge of YOIs, what would you do to make the move from a juvenile YOI to a young adult YOI better, more helpful, for young people?

Noah: I'd actually talk to them, tell them what's actually going on, not just surprise someone, you know because not [...] everyone doesn't care about what's going to happen to them, like they're actually worried, you know? So I'd actually help them through, tell them something about the prison, not just leave them guessing in their pad. You know I've been waiting almost ten weeks to go, you know if that was somebody else they'd be thinking what the bloody hell

is going on [...] you know, and actually talk to them, my caseworker ain't talked to me about anything (pre-transition interview).

Data is 'subjectively filtered through our own emotional lens' (Phillips 2012, p. 61), which is constructed by our own biography and experiences (Jewkes 2011). The 'sad and anguished' biographies of young people were undoubtedly exacerbated by their incarceration (Phillips 2012). Perhaps understandably, participants would often brush-off quite upsetting experiences, such as being strip-searched upon arrival or bearing witness to self-harm. Yet for me, these were some of the most shocking aspects of their experiences. Liebling (2001, p. 474) states that 'the capacity to feel, relate, and become 'involved'' is a key aspect of ethical research. Yet this takes careful engagement with which (if any) emotions to 'appropriately' display (McGowan 2020, Waters et al. 2020). I felt that it was important to strike a delicate balance between conveying concern, whilst not appearing complicit in considering such circumstances to be expected, nor desensitised (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2020). Showing too much concern may have left them question their own well-being. Within interviews, I asked if the young people felt comfortable elaborating on these events. To retain ethical sensitivity (Christensen and Prout 2002), I kept a fieldwork diary to ensure reflective appraisal of myself as a researcher and my analysis of the young people's experiences (Sloan and Wright 2015). These reflections illustrated the importance of emotions as 'vital sources' of data (Bergaman Blix and Wettergren 2015, p. 688) (see chapter seven for a reflection on the ethics of emotions in research with young people).

Emotions such as anxiety, vulnerability and trauma are ever-present in the prison environment (Jewkes 2011). In this research there was the potential that young people would be concerned about their upcoming transition (pre-transition interview), or upset about how their transition was handled (post-transition interview). Upon escorting me to Noah's post-transition interview, his supervisor took the opportunity to inform him that his parole date was much later than he expected. This clearly upset and frustrated Noah. Because of this, he may have been less inclined to share his experiences if I appeared 'overly associated' or friendly with prison staff (Phillips 2012). Prior to the interview, I checked whether he was okay to proceed and reiterated my independence from the institution. Within the interview, this information clearly played on his mind and he raised it a few times during our discussions. I was acutely aware of how powerless I was to address his concerns about the parole date and unable to offer him any reassurance. I felt limited on my ability to follow-up on his well-

being, as I would not meet with him again. These examples were some of the most ethically challenging aspects of the study.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from research with young people interviewed at two points as 'children' and 'adults', this chapter has outlined some of the tricky emergent ethical tensions inherent within prison research with young people. Whilst children are considered vulnerable, adults rarely are, despite broader evidence to the contrary (Harris 2015, House of Commons Justice Committee 2016a). As illustrated, conducting research with vulnerable groups can be obstructed or manipulated by gatekeepers, and the process of negotiation to satisfy the rights and best interests of participants can be challenging (Girling 2017, Heptinstall 2000). Gatekeeping can present additional issues for ensuring informed, voluntary consent, along with opportunities for participants to express their dissent or refusal to participate. Careful ongoing consideration and ethical reflection is thus needed (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Engaging in ethical reflexivity can ensure that researchers are sensitive to the ethical tensions associated with unavoidable power imbalances between those they are researching and their own emotions. When seeking to conduct research of this nature, researchers must consider the emotional impacts on participants but also on themselves. This includes a critical and ethical reflection on how participants will be accessed and approached (and by whom), their engagement with the research and researcher in a particular context, and how findings are disseminated back to participants. The need to ensure that research participation does not extend the harms already experienced by young people because of their disenfranchised and incarcerated status is crucial. Rather than excluding them, researchers wishing to engage with young people in this context should seek to mitigate potential harms by focusing on the individuality of each interviewee, being sensitive to their perspectives and circumstances as part of ethical research practice.

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The author has been employed as a research associate, and contributed to inspection work carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons.

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