Research on the 'Inside': The Challenges of Conducting Research with Young Offenders

by **Nalita James**
University of Leicester

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Abstract

There is a limited literature examining the ethical dilemmas that arise when research is conducted in prison settings, and the extent to which it is possible to give voice to young offenders' experiences, thus placing them at the centre of the research process. By drawing on a qualitative research with young offenders, the paper will discuss how prison research can be truly ethical when it is conducted with participants who are far from autonomous. This raises a number of challenges for researchers that this paper will consider. These include accessing young offenders' lives; ensuring the credibility of young offenders' voices; and leaving the prison setting. The paper highlights the ethical research strategies that researchers can adopt in conducting research with young offenders, and the importance of researchers adopting a reflexive approach to better understand the social context of young offenders' lives.

Keywords: *Access, Confidentiality, Consent Ethics, Reflexive, Prisons, Voice, Young Offenders*

Introduction

1.1 Young adults are increasingly seen by social researchers as active social agents, able to articulate their own experiences and express their views. Their voices have been heard through research on topics that include young adults' experiences of sexuality, disability, criminality, and drug abuse (Stephen & Squires 2003; Macdonald & Marsh 2005; Jahnukainen 2009). At the heart of such studies is an increased interest in the diversity of youth experience in which greater emphasis and respect is placed on young adults' identity and the interplay of individual agency, circumstance, and social structure (Thomson et al. 2002: 336). Further, these studies have drawn on a range of research methods such as participatory methods or action research as an attempt to empower young adults in contexts where 'many aspects of their lives are objectified and held up to (often negative) scrutiny' (Heath et al. 2009: 14), by involving them in the development of the research process and to better understand the social context of their lives (Holdsworth & Morgan 2005).

1.2 Research with young adults, particularly those who are (socially) marginalised, can be conducted in contexts that challenge the concepts of agency and competency (Heath et al. 2007). More specifically, young adults' lives tend to be structured by a range of age-specific contexts and formal settings such as educational institutions, statutory organisations and youth and welfare agencies. When research is conducted in youth-orientated settings such as young offenders institutions (YOIs), the ethical dilemmas are intensified because of the 'closed' nature of the environment (Cowie et al. 2007) and the restrictions imposed on young offenders' freedom and personal autonomy (Bartlett & Canvin 2003).

1.3 Research on young offenders has tended to focus on the interrelationship between 'risk factors' (family, school, community and personal) and the significant differences between young adults who offend and those who do not (Armstrong et al. 2005; Byrne 2005; Armstrong 2006); as well as the types of offences committed (Bursik & Gramick 2006). While the identification of risk factors has dominated the policy agenda (Armstrong et al. 2005) other research has highlighted the complexity of young adults' involvement in crime. This has been addressed by exploring young adults' perspectives to understand offending and problem behaviour as well as their experiences of crime, the criminal justice system, and prison life (Wilson 2006; Cowie et al. 2007; Harvey 2008). However, prison is a complex setting and there

are many external and internal obstacles that can easily prevent researchers from being able to carry out the research (Harvey 2005). Research agendas can be easily hijacked as a consequence of institutional, funding or policy pressures seeking to deliver broader prison system change or reduce offending rates, rather than meeting individual needs. They are also volatile places, and access to prisoners can be undermined by the micro politics of such institutions and local tensions (King & Wincup 2008). This can mean that crucial questions about how young offenders are heard and feel can become neglected and the interplay of the 'young-person-as-offender' overlooked (Holt & Pamment 2010: 126).

1.4 In these circumstances how can young offenders actually be given a 'voice', and, more crucially, will the 'voice' that they have been given be loud enough? (Wilson 2006). If not, can such research be justified? Voice is about the right to be heard and to share one's experiences and perspectives (Ashby 2011). In the prison system, opportunities for young offenders to express their views can be limited or neglected because of the lack of resources and personal autonomy (Bartlett & Canvin 2003). Their voices can also be undermined by their status as convicted persons and too often their views are dismissed on the basis that they are unreliable witnesses, that they are prone to telling lies and that they are incapable of giving sensible answers. This raises questions about the extent to which young offenders' voices are used in prison research and who benefits. As Carlen's (1985) research on female prisoners observes, there is a limit as to how far participants can be made to 'speak for themselves'. Researchers therefore have to accept their responsibilities... 'in co-producing, rather than simply discovering the world of their research' (Wilson 2006: 183). These responsibilities include resolving the ethical and practical difficulties that can emerge in the research process. The 'prison' research context is particularly significant in ethical decision making because the procedures for dealing with informed consent; the nuances of absolute confidentiality; and the making of research participants aware of the risks and benefits of taking part in the process are rigorous due to concerns about coercion and incarcerated persons' limited capacity for voluntary informed consent.

1.5 This paper contributes to the methodological literature on researching young adults in prisons, by considering the ethical challenges faced by a project team conducting research on young offenders' learning transitions. In particular, the paper places emphasis on how research among young offenders is designed and can be truly ethical, particularly when they are far from autonomous. This raises a number of challenges for researchers that this paper will consider. These include accessing young offenders' lives; assuring confidentiality and the credibility of young offenders' voices; and leaving the prison setting. While it can be argued that such issues are not solely relevant to researching young offenders, they highlight important insights into the extent to which ethical research strategies address the vulnerability of young offenders, particularly when these participants are far from autonomous. The paper also highlights the importance of the project adopting a reflexive approach to fully understand their agency, and in turn, provide them with a positive experience for time spent *on the inside*. Before moving on to address such issues, the paper will discuss how the research was conducted.

The research study: design and methods

2.1 The research study was located in a YOI in the East Midlands of England over a period of 9 months in 2006 and was led by a project team that included researchers and drama practitioners. The YOI that took part in this study held male young offenders only, aged 18–21, either on remand or sentenced to custody. The study aimed to bring a 'qualitative consciousness' (Arditti et al. 2010: 1389) to the study of marginalized populations impacted by imprisonment. Implicit in such an approach was the exposure of disadvantage and oppression and 'preserving the perspective of those whose human experience is being studied' (Byrne 2005: 226). The study also aimed to understand the impact of drama on the young offenders' learning dispositions and identities (see James & McNeil 2009 for a detailed discussion of the study). It was structured around two key research questions:

- i. What impact does drama have on the development of young offenders' learning and skills development?
- ii. What transitions emerge as a consequence of their participation in drama?

2.2 Rather than identify the young men with their past or current 'offending behaviour', the project team sought to engage with them primarily as individuals, but also as participants in a creative process (as 'actors'), through which the potential as both learners and creative beings could be developed and explored. This approach drew on a qualitative methodology to provide the young offenders with a more direct voice (Shah 2006) and to give a 'representation of reality through the eyes of the young offenders' (Woodall 2007: 133). It provided the flexibility to adapt to the existing culture of the young men and their social world, and to explore in-depth the complex practices and views of the young offenders as experienced and managed (Emond 2003). It also had the potential to give more credence to the experiences and opinions of those with less power, by uncovering meaning, perception, and values in relation to the young men's experiences thus challenging what Becker (1966/7) has described as the '*hierarchy of credibility*'. Beyond the value of allowing participants to tell their story, a qualitative consciousness was also required that allowed the project to reflect ethically and socially, and possibly view their own lives differently as a result of the research experience (Arditti et al. 2010: 1389).

2.3 Although the research sample was a 'captive' study population, volunteer offenders were sought for the study by displaying posters about it in the education wing of the prison. This offered the project team an informal method of data sampling a hidden population, enabling us to establish a small number of initial contacts for the study. Consequently, a total of 18 young offenders signed up to take part, although eventually we ended up with 14 volunteers mainly due to their release from the YOI or transfer to another prison. Although the project team recognised that this method would hardly lead to a representative sample it was the best method available to us, as discussed later in the paper.

2.4 Those offenders who took part in the study had committed a wide range of offences relating to drugs, criminal damage, domestic burglary, forgery and fraud, and motoring offences; and their prison terms ranged from 6 months to 2 years. Some of the young offenders were a long way from home, having been previously held in other custodial establishments. Many had young families or girlfriends; others were due to become fathers; some had no contact with their immediate families at all. All of the prisoners had negative life experiences including poor school achievement, school exclusion, family problems and antisocial behaviour. Some had a range of problems such as mental health issues and learning difficulties. All of the young men had left compulsory education before the age of 16, with some saying they had never attended school. Some were enrolled in education courses in the prison, including numeracy and literacy, as well as practical-based courses such as carpentry and engineering. However, their engagement was not always participative – some of it was attendance or discipline-based, rather than a conscious engagement in learning.

2.5 Decisions regarding what research methods to use, are not simply based on methodological choice. As Swartz (2011: 51–52) argues: 'Ultimately method is constitutive of the research project and [can impinge] on young people's vulnerability and therefore ethics'. In addressing this issue, multiple methods of qualitative data collection were used in the prison setting as an intentional ethical research strategy to foreground the young offenders' voices and provide sufficient depth to corroborate the findings. These included two focus group interviews, observation and field notes, as well as individual interviews to gain insight in the young men's learning transitions. A final method was the use of Forum Theatre, which takes its inspiration from the work of Augusto Boal (see Boal 1998 for a more detailed discussion), as part of a 10-week drama programme to open up possibilities for reflection, and the production of knowledge through interaction with others (Kapanti & Yuval-Davis 2008). In the programme, the young offenders were asked to examine oppressive aspects of their lived experiences through role-play, and to bring the scenario(s) to a different conclusion, in which a cycle of oppression could be interrupted. The method played a central role in supporting them to develop greater awareness of their actions and communications within a shared context, and also to creatively express their own experiences in a non-judgemental environment. Given its creative emphasis, it also kept the young offenders engaged, active and occupied with the research, and enabled them to develop a different identity that is separate from 'prisoner' (James & McNeil 2009; Anderson & Overy 2010).

Research ethics

3.1 Research ethics can have a considerable impact on how research is designed, conducted, and facilitated, particularly when it is conducted with vulnerable or risky populations such as young adults and children, or in institutional settings where the permission of a gatekeeper is required for access to its members (see the Economic Social Research Council's Framework for Research Ethics 2010). How the potential vulnerability of research participants is responded to then is fundamental to the practice of ethical research. This is heightened in the prison setting when it is all too easy to forget that young offenders are 'living, breathing people with personalities, characteristics, likes and dislikes' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 251).

3.2 The project team engaged in a lengthy and iterative dialogue about how to design and carry out the research to assure it was carried out with an 'ethic of respect' for the young offenders (British Educational Research Association 2004: 4). This dialogue was informed by social moral frameworks, whether codified or not, as well as our own moral predilections and views about ensuring that the young offenders' voices were heard and understood (Busher & James 2012). Our deontological stance emphasised the rights of the young men, to ensure mutual respect and the protection of their human dignity. As the rest of the paper shows, we engaged in a constantly reflective process as we critically examined the ethical challenges we faced in gaining access and consent; assuring confidentiality and credibility; and leaving the research setting, as well as how these played out in practice. We also reflected on our own position and roles in the research process, and our sense of personal responsibility in ensuring an ethic of respect for the young offenders. Usher (2000: 162) sees this as an emerging ethical moment that 'is not purely the function of the application of ethical codes of practice'.

Accessing the young offenders' lives: 'Why am I here, Miss?'

3.3 The potential for prisoners to take part in research will be dependent on the goodwill of institutional gatekeepers to grant access and consent (Heath et al. 2007). In particular, the gatekeeping role is intensified in prison settings because of the restrictions imposed on individual's freedom and autonomy (Bartlett & Canvin 2003). In the research study, difficulties of access represented a time-consuming problem that delayed the research at several stages. In essence these difficulties took two forms: gaining access to institutions; and thereafter gaining access to the young adults themselves. In relation to the former, the research involved negotiating access to the young adults in YOIs and this involved protracted negotiations and renegotiations with HM Prison Service about the aims of the study and benefits to the prison, as well as reassuring the prison that the research would not be too disruptive. This access was dependent on the YOI's perceived importance of the topic, and the trade-off between both the benefits and possible demands of having a project team around (King & Windup 2008). The YOI participating in the study was keen to examine the impact of creative teaching and learning on criminal behaviour. Our concern in this was the extent to which the young offenders, given their vulnerability and lack of autonomy, could be exploited in order to meet the YOI's objectives. However, not including the perspectives of the young offenders also held the potential to increase their vulnerability, by ignoring their experiences and circumstances, thereby missing out on data that was important in finding ways to better understand young offenders learning transitions. We overcame this issue by giving the young offenders the opportunities to relate their own experiences rather than have others do so on their behalf. In this way, they stood to benefit from the research.

3.4 Our next step was to access the young offenders, and this had to be negotiated via the prison governor and senior prison officers. Staff who work with young adults in statutory institutions and who tend to formally act as 'gatekeepers', can make research processes frustrating (Wilson 2006). To protect the best interests of the participants it was vital to build good rapport with these gatekeepers, which we did by having a number of meetings about the study so they fully understood its purpose and aims, particularly as they would be helping us to recruit young offenders to the study. Yet, the powerless status of the young offenders, and the power of the gatekeeping role became evident as prison officers blocked access to any young offenders who had been placed on a charge for poor behaviour in the prison wings, for example by fighting or being verbally abusive. Further, the study posters were not always displayed in the education wing of the prison as originally agreed. This threatened the prospect of gaining voluntary informal consent as well as potentially excluding willing volunteers. Out of the 14 young men who had volunteered to participate in the research study, 11 turned up for the focus group interviews.

3.5 How could their participation be described as voluntary then? Had they been coerced to participate? The desire to participate in research depends on the willingness of the participants to share their experiences (Morrisey 2012). We could not be sure that the young men had exercised their freedom of choice in taking part in the study. The project team wanted to get their perspectives but we did not wish to compromise their sense of well being. Our stance was if the young offenders were willing to talk freely about their experiences without duress, the credibility of their voices could be enhanced. In adopting this approach, we also wondered what the consequences would be for those young offenders who were reluctant to speak or expressed strong views about not taking part in the research study – especially if prison staff had 'volunteered' offenders to take part. Again this was not a simple matter, because of the compulsory nature of the regimes which can leave prisoners feeling obliged to take part in research (Harvey 2005). During the focus groups the extent of the young offenders' 'coerced participation' began to unravel as some of them asked us: *Why am I here, Miss?* or angrily stated that they did not want to be involved in the study: *it's all shit*. In attempting to overcome these dilemmas, we created space to explain who we were and the purposes of the study so that the young men would have time to think carefully about whether or not to participate in the research study. In particular, we emphasised that we would be conducting interviews but they would not be like police interviews, in which information gathered can be used in evidence against them. Further, we allowed time for the young offenders to ask questions about us; about the study; express doubts and opinions, but we also found we had very little control over the interaction other than generally keeping participants focused on the topic. The ethics of doing this was out of respect for the young offenders, to give them a sense of autonomy that is severely restricted in prison life, and to gain their 'assent', allowing them to choose the extent that they wished to participate. The project team concluded that those who did speak out in the focus groups did so freely, without coercion. In this way, we viewed the young offenders as active social agents in the research, who had the capacity to articulate their views about taking part. Eventually, one participant commented angrily about his negative experience of prison education. He was completely frustrated:

I have been doing the same thing for 5–6 months. I started the damn course again, so today I thought I am going to ask again about level 2 literacy. Why do they get angry and refer me from the unit, and then I get a warning...because they do not tell you where you are going...

3.6 It must be noted, however, that on more than one occasion, the young offenders seemed disinterested and impatient with the process of offering information and gaining their consent. Some said *can't we just get on with it huh?* We were also aware of those individuals reluctant to talk about their experiences for fear of embarrassment or ridicule. A number of the young offenders had experienced drug and alcohol abuse; some did not have the oral or social skills to communicate effectively (see also Bryan et al. 2007). This highlighted a tension between adopting an ethical approach to the research and seeking informed consent, and the necessity to respect the young offenders' level of interest and the amount of time they wished to spend hearing about the study and/or take part in it. Consequently, we gave them the opportunity to express 'informed dissent' (Edwards & Allred 1999, authors' emphasis) at any stage throughout the study thus allowing us to reconfirm each participant's wish to take part or continue. We did this by not revealing to the prison officers which young offenders had opted out of the study; asking the participants what they wanted to talk about or respecting their rights to remain silent until they could be escorted back to their prison cells. We respected their opinions and expressions of dissent highlighting 'that it is invariably a brave act to say "no" in an institutional context' (Heath et al. 2007: 413) as some young offenders did:

*I'm not interested...it's crap
This won't be any use; I'm not going to gain anything from it so what's the point
It's boring
Drama's the worst*

3.7 There were some young offenders due for imminent release who thought the research might be useful for when they got out. Some of them also felt that participating in something informal, creative, in a quiet space, or that might make a difference, could help to combat the negative impact of prison life. Their comments were not just instrumental factors but involved 'complex affective issues that concern agency and hope' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 256). They made us more aware of the ethically meaningful implications of being present in the YOI. To that end, we were responsible in ensuring that the participants gave assent, did so of their own volition and without coercion. We decided to continually review the consent of those who did want to take part, to ensure the young offenders were satisfied with their voluntary participation in the study. We also emphasised their right to withdraw. Further, it was agreed that an individual could assent to some aspects of the study and dissent to other elements. We also reminded them about how grateful we were that they were helping us with our research, which in turn brought a sense of control to their participation.

Confidentiality and credibility: 'I hate being classed as a criminal'

3.8 In the research study the promise of confidentiality was instrumental in gaining the trust of the young offenders, particularly as prisons are by definition a low-trust environment (Liebling 1999). We found that some of the young offenders would only agree to be individually interviewed if we assured them of 'absolute' confidentiality. Thus, we had to decide what to do if the participants not only disclosed about the offences for which they had been convicted, but also to other non-convicted offences. Further, as we wanted to know about their experiences of prison life, there was the potential that they could make other disclosures related to this, perhaps involving drugs or violence. In the end, we clearly and precisely communicated to the young offenders that we would offer confidentiality, but if there were disclosures that could mean that someone was placed at serious risk or danger, then we would be morally obliged to pass the information on to others. We also asked them not to tell us about offences that they had committed unless they were the subjects of criminal proceedings. Ironically, some young offenders told us that they *don't trust nobody man* but would then unexpectedly disclose something about their lives. We were satisfied that the young offenders knew about the boundaries of confidentiality so that they did not inadvertently disclose something that we would have to share with others.

3.9 One of the difficulties that the project team faced throughout the study, and which made the decision about the promise of confidentiality even harder, was the extent to which the young offenders were being truthful about their disclosures. Prison officers telling us not to believe what the young offenders told us reinforced this. We actually became annoyed with such negative comments and accepted the young offenders' stories as authentic and credible, rather than undermine their voices and dismiss their views as unworthy or meaningless. This was an important element of building trust and rapport with them, and consequently, the young offenders: 'participated, made choices, drew us into relationships with them and involved us in their world' (Liebling 1999: 158).

3.10 Right from the start of the research study, we were conscious of the imbalance of power between the young offenders and ourselves. To reduce the power differentials, we introduced ourselves as researchers who were independent from the prison authorities and interested in finding out about their lives both on the 'inside' and 'outside'. As the research progressed, a number of the participants approached us to find out more about the study and about us. We also adopted the role of 'semi-participant observers' (Swain 2006: 208) during the drama programme by participating in the warm-up exercises and games at the start of each drama session, but also distancing ourselves to take field notes and make unstructured observations which provided further insight into the interactions of the young offenders. These strategies provided a means by which the young men could (re) familiarise themselves with our presence, and vice versa. They ensured no one was deceived as to why we were there, and in turn allowed us to find out more about the young men's lives, as observed by a member of the project team:

He asked me about my role in the research. I told him I was a skills for life tutor at xxx College looking to see how the theatre/ drama supports their learning. He asked if there was a music part of the college. We talked about Eminem, the rapper, who he informed me has a daughter that he writes lyrics about...I asked him some more about his lyrics and about rapping and how he got into it, what he learns from doing it...(researcher field notes, 2006)

3.11 Some were particularly interested in what the research could do for them. We answered as honestly as possible, explaining the ways in which using drama could enable them to think about how they might deal with situations differently, and that we hoped our research would influence prison policy. We further tried to reduce the 'asymmetry of power' (Swartz 2011: 59) by not conforming to the prison staff's views of the young offenders or the fact they called them by their surnames thus removing the young men's criminal agency, if only temporarily. Instead, we asked the young offenders if we could call them by their first names. We also asked them to call us by ours. We were not overly concerned by how the young offenders chose to address us, as long as they were polite and respectful. Adopting these ethical strategies ensured the young offenders were more receptive to our presence. One participant found this a positive experience.

You talk to us, like, I don't know, like you ain't a criminal. I hate being classed as a criminal...I hate it...it's just not like being in jail here [in the drama programme], it's like being...somewhere else, if you know what I mean...you're doing this, and like have a laugh, you ain't worried about nothing...

3.12 An integral part of allowing the voices of the young offenders to be heard and understood, was the use of the drama programme that provided a creative space for the young men to explore issues and challenges, in safety, to develop greater awareness of their actions and communications within a shared context, and also to creatively express their own experiences in a non-judgemental environment. On many occasions during the programme, the young offenders would embrace the opportunity to act out stories and make connections to their lives, offering an empowering experience:

Like, it's more interactive, I feel like I'm learning something, learning more about me, man, and then it's learning how to work in a team, and being heard, it's different to other courses in the prison I've been on, you know...sometimes you go on these courses and the tutors don't give a shit, but you guys, well it's different cos at least you're listening to me...

3.13 While generally our research relationships with the young offenders was respectful and reciprocal, we were also aware of how notoriously difficult or challenging prison settings can be to work in, being affected on a day-to-day basis by the attitudes and dispositions of the prisoners (Liebling 1999). Sometimes, the young offenders were tired, depressed, distracted or bored and did not really want to

participate in the research. On more than one occasion, we had to temporarily suspend the drama programme, when it became evident what was feasible and desirable with the young offenders, as noted in the following observation:

...this session is not going very well, xxxxx [young offender] is playing with a lighter which he should not have brought into the classroom. He keeps taking it out of his pocket, waving it at the other offenders. He knows he's being watched, and has just slid the lighter under xxxxxx's chair. Hope there is not going to be a fight because xxxxxx is really angry. The prison tutor has threatened to put the whole group on a report if the lighter is not surrendered- the best thing would be for us to take a break, cos I am a bit scared what might happen next !! (researcher fieldnotes, 2006).

3.14 In such moments, we tried to put aside our value judgements and beliefs about what was and was not appropriate behaviour in this situation. We adopted a non-condemnatory attitude towards the young offenders, getting them to reflect on what had happened in the 'lighter' incident and how they could resolve it differently. This ethical stance enabled us, on most occasions, to get the young offenders to confront 'in a fundamental way, issues which [were] deep, personally threatening, and potentially painful' (Lee 1999: 98). The situation also provided a reflexive moment in which the project team recognised the emotional charged nature of prison research and the turbulent experience for both researchers and the researched. In the process, 'research may be transformed into an experience that is much more than the gathering of information into which the researcher becomes an advocate' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 259).

Leaving the prison setting, but: 'When are you coming back?'

3.15 The final phase of the research involved individually interviewing the young offenders in the prison setting. There were five 'volunteers'. The interviews explored in more depth their experiences of the drama programme, future aspirations and life on the outside. As noted earlier, for young offenders who have been repeatedly interviewed by the police, the idea of a research interview can be somewhat threatening, and participants may be suspicious of the researchers' intent (Cowie et al. 2007). By the time we came to conduct the interviews, the young men did not feel threatened by our presence; we had developed rapport and reciprocity with them during the drama sessions, and contrary to Holt and Pamment's (2010) negative experiences of interviewing young offenders, we found that the method offered rich data. As the interviews progressed, their voices became more voluble as they talked about using the skills developed during the drama programme (e.g. confidence, respect, and team working) to other areas in their lives, in particular employment, but also in family life and with their friends. The young men 'participated, made choices, drew us into relationships with them and involved us in their world' (Liebling 1999: 158). It was evident too that their life in prison involved a 'liminal phase' (Harvey 2005: 238) in which they were in transition and between two worlds. They looked forward to being reintegrated into a new way of life as they talked about release, finding employment, going to college and looking after their family. This was particularly evident in one young offender's story.

Cos before, like, I didn't want to get up for work in the morning. But, like, it made me think that...it's better when you, like, you've got something else...keep you motivated and that... this will be important for when I get out like...I really don't want to come back in here you know, it would just be so shit...

3.16 Not all the young men were forthcoming in the interviews. Sometimes they hesitated or would answer abruptly when asked about home and family. Missing family and being captive was a difficult aspect of prison life. Of course, the project team was able to freely leave the prison setting, and go home after each visit. As the study began to draw to a close, we had not fully comprehended the impact of the study on and our presence in the young offenders' lives. Early in the study we had clarified the boundaries of the researcher-researched relationship making it clear to the participants how many days a week we would be in the prison for, and the length of the study, eliminating any false expectations about our presence. Yet many of the prisoners wanted the research study to continue, especially the drama programme, and for it to be a regular part of their lives. They reflected *now you're leaving* reinforcing that sense of isolation as they returned to their cell or wing, and that they would *have to get back to reality*. Even those young men who were leaving prison were keen to know whether/when we were coming back. In one interview, one researcher commented: *We'd like to, but it all sadly depends on money...we'd like to come back – probably it will be later in the year or early next.*

3.17 Our departure from the YOI was associated with guilt as we had identified with the participants cognitively and affectively in understanding the difficulty of their situations, yet could provide no direct solutions for their problems. We also had feelings of unease about leaving the YOI, not knowing what would happen to the young offenders after our departure. Our ethical strategy was to listen to the young offenders respectfully and value their opinions and knowledge, empowering them to speak out about issues that were relevant to them, tell their stories and to make connections with their lives. Further, we had not realised the impact of our response in raising their expectations that we might return, highlighting a greater need for us to reflect carefully on the hopes and expectations of the young men. In prison settings, such issues become even more significant as young offenders often perceive that they have no control over their immediate situation due to the uncertainty around them (Harvey 2005). This suggests that, 'rarely will participants or the researcher feel totally separate from one another' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 258). Although we did not share cultural knowledge or identity with the young men, we still made individual connections that were meaningful to the young men, as indicated in the following interview extract:

R: Well I wish you all the luck in the world

P: Thanks

R: And in the birth of your baby daughter, and you know in whatever you do. And I hope you get your release date in July...thanks for this afternoon as well

P: That's all right

R: And I mean you can find me if you can remember... and if you want to find out a bit more you know you can find me there

P: It's like good like someone's taking an interest like...terrible conditions man here, especially if you're learning...

3.18 Such connections will not only be 'meaningful for those who have been symbolically and literally removed from the world through incarceration' (Bosworth et al. 2005: 261). As the interview extract also illustrates, such connections can also be meaningful for researchers. The stories the young men told were 'enduring truths' and 'based on real human feeling and experience' (Liebling 1999: 164). These stories inevitably affected the way we interacted with the young offenders. We felt empathy for their experiences, and on occasions during the interviews we were unprepared for our own feelings and reactions towards the young men. Sometimes we reacted emotionally to their stories and developed a closeness to the subject of the research so that at times it became difficult to maintain a sense of distance and detachment with the data gathered particularly during the interviews, thus affecting our interpretations and representations of the young men's stories and subjectivities. We did not always avoid blurring the researcher/participant boundary. However, given that our social locations and personal histories were significantly different from our participants, we could retain some level of objectivity and 'react to the [participants'] responses while simultaneously staying in touch with, and reflecting on [our] own feelings' (Shah 2006: 211). This approach prevented us from becoming too absorbed in the participants' stories, allowing us to analytically reflect on their experiences, probing further at appropriate points during the interviews. It was possible to reconcile our emotions with our so-called data.

Discussion

4.1 This paper has discussed the ethical challenges that emerged during a research study investigating male young offenders' criminal behaviours and learning transitions. These included accessing the young offenders' lives; assuring confidentiality and the credibility of the young offenders' voices; and leaving the prison setting. Using a qualitative approach with the participants captured the subjective reality of the setting, and provided rich descriptive data. However, the institutional context of the YOI exerted a strong shaping influence over the research activity. Further, the young men lived their lives in a social environment in which their voices had a reduced level of respect; self-confidence and other achievements were also low.

4.2 It is clear that young offenders are an extremely vulnerable population, with severely restricted autonomy. Ethical research in such settings carries with it 'a responsibility to grapple with the fact that potential harm is ubiquitous in everyday prison life, creating an environment for research in which the choice to participate in a study can be inherently coercive and potentially dangerous' (Arditti et al. 2010: 1409). The paper suggests a number of ethical research strategies that may help to diffuse such possibilities when research is conducted with young offenders.

4.3 Firstly, multiple methods can enable researchers to capture young offenders' perspectives and ensure they are not misrepresented. The use of theatre as a research method can open up a creative environment for young offenders' voices to be heard and understood. By encouraging young offenders to challenge past experiences and engage in a range of previously inaccessible options and roles, they can experience the emotions and outcomes that can help them in the future. It can help to remove, if only temporarily, their vulnerable and powerless status. This reiterates the importance of young offenders understanding what the benefits of research participation can bring. As Swartz (2011: 49) contends, 'The purpose of such an ethics of reciprocity is to give back both ownership of knowledge and material benefit to those participating in research'.

4.4 Secondly, the power and influence of gatekeepers in prison research cannot be underestimated. As Woodall (2007) observes, prison staff have a demanding role in looking after young offenders and upholding institutional regime and policy. As the project team experienced, prison staff can deny participants the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want to participate in research challenging the prospect of obtaining voluntary informed consent, as well as excluded willing volunteers. Gatekeeping prisoners in these ways can make the development of trust-based relationships with young offenders difficult. This is particularly so when the researcher and the researched are not part of the same social network (Conolly 2008). In such circumstances, young offenders may find it hard to state that they do not wish to participate in research.

4.5 In prison settings, it is more difficult to provide integrity to the process of informed consent, but this does not remove the obligation. Young offenders should, however, have control and choice over what kind of research they participate in, and feel they are sufficiently informed as well as free to enrol or withdraw at will. If it is determined that voluntary informed consent is not obtainable, then researchers need to consider the ethics of pursuing it in the first place.

4.6 Finally, leaving the research setting, ending research relationships and the impact on those being left behind must be considered as part of the research design (Emond 2003). We had feelings of guilt and unease about leaving the YOI, not knowing what would happen to the young offenders after our departure. As Arditti et al. (2010: 1389) argue, 'Political awareness and perhaps discomfort may arise because a qualitative consciousness often involves the exposure of disadvantage and oppression'. Without the project team's presence and an understanding of the experiences of young offenders, change cannot occur. By listening to young offenders respectfully and valuing their opinions and knowledge, they can

hopefully feel empowered to speak out about issues that are relevant to them, tell their stories and to make connections to their lives. In researching young offenders' lives researchers too can give voice to their experiences, and provide an insight into what life is like in prison.

Conclusions

5.1 Throughout the research study, the project team have been mindful of Liebling's (1999: 151) view that 'prisons are...commonly difficult places to work'. Indeed, the research was intense, emotional, difficult and risky. Such reflections should not, however, be left invisible, but should be embraced and subsequently utilised, as a source of knowing what can challenge the institutional regimes of YOIs, as well as provide a sense of authenticity and transparency that can often be overlooked in prison research. Being reflexive enabled the project team to deal with the challenges of researching *on the inside* with attention and sensitivity. In this approach, researchers are better placed to be aware of ethically important moments as they arise during the research. We displayed our positionality and were cultural responsive to the institutional and social setting. In this way the study was focused on process rather than product opening up the possibilities for us to place at the heart of the research the voices of the young men, and listen carefully to what they themselves had to say when making sense about their lives.

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