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Feminist Ethics and Research with Women in Prison

Christina Quinlan¹, Lucy Baldwin², and Natalie Booth³

Abstract

In this article, a new model, An Ethic of Empathy, is proposed as a guide for researchers, particularly new scholars to the discipline. This model emerged from the authors' concerns regarding the application of ethics to studies that focus on the experience of female offenders in criminal justice systems. The key issue is the vulnerability of incarcerated and post-release women in relationship to the powerful status of social scientist researchers. The complexity of ethics in such research settings necessitates a particular ethical preparation, involving formation, reflection, understanding, commitment, care, and empathy. Three cases are outlined which document the authors' ethical formations as researchers.

Keywords

ethics, research, women, prison

Introduction

In this article, the issue of ethics and research as applied to studies of women in prison is explored. All three authors have researched the experiences of women across correctional settings, criminal justice systems, social justice

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venues, and social control dynamics. This involved being engaged critically with incarcerated women and their lived experience of prison space, and with their experiences of motherhood and mothering roles during and after prison. This has led to our reflections on the pains of imprisonment while engaging reflexively with our own *outsider* perspectives. Fundamentally, we are concerned with the power and status of the researcher and the profound ethical issues that arise in the particular circumstances of women-as-subject studies in correctional settings. We believe that these issues have a level of complexity that necessitates a particular ethical preparation, formation, reflection, understanding, commitment, care, and empathy.

We, therefore, suggest that research with women in criminal justice systems (CJS) and especially women who are still imprisoned should be undertaken only after great consideration of the power and status imbedded in researcher roles. In this article, we present three cases which outline each of our experiences, concerns, and development in terms of ethical applications to our own research with women in prison. We propose a new model, An Ethic of Empathy, which we hope will be of use to researchers, in particular to new scholars in the discipline, as a guide to their ethical reflections and reasoning related to their carceral studies. We want to contribute to a continuing discussion on research ethics, with emphasis on studies of imprisoned women and vulnerable women in criminal justice systems. Through sharing our experiences, we hope to promote a deeper and more critical engagement with research ethics.

Literature Review

In penology and in criminology, ethical issues in research are generally deemed to be well rehearsed. The American Society of Criminology (ASC) has, for example, a very elaborate published Code of Ethics, (American Society of Criminology, Code of Ethics), which sets forth general principles and ethical standards for use in guiding academic investigations. Instead of a Code of Ethics, the British Society of Criminology (BSC) has a Statement of Ethics for Researchers, (British Society of Criminology, Statement of Ethics), designed, as detailed in the Statement, to reflect a changing landscape and emerging codes of practice. The British Society of Criminology emphasises the importance of a continuing discussion around issues such as research integrity and research misconduct, while asserting the need for researchers to be protective of the rights of participants, including their sensitivities and right to privacy.

Grounding in ethics is central to research, and an in-depth understanding of ethical practice applications is essential for every researcher. Criminal justice system research often involves engaging with participants who have contravened the law. The implications for those conducting such investigations can be

profound, including issues of personal safety and professional integrity. Academics may find themselves in situations where they have to take a stand and challenge power, often aimed at individuals in authority, agencies and organizations, and, of course, social structures. A solid foundation and formation in ethical practice can mean the difference between success and failure for individual researchers who face negotiating such challenges.

Given the fundamental importance of ethics, it not surprising that there are many reflections in the literature regarding how to conduct ethical research and apply ethical practice in criminal justice environments. For example, in a criminal justice ethnographic study conducted in the United States, Worley et al., highlighted “harrowing” experiences within which there were “ethical dilemmas all day long”. In another example, Scraton (2016), writing about his long-term research with women prisoners in Northern Ireland, emphasized the brutalising punishments of imprisonment and the requirement of researchers in the field to bear “witness to the pain of others”. He wrote that there is a moral duty, an ethical obligation, and a political responsibility for critical social science to showcase penal policy and regimes regarding abuses of power—and to do so from below, i.e. through engaging in research with those imprisoned in these systems and regimes.

In addition, there are concerns detailed in the literature related to the workings of university research ethics committees. These include the challenges faced by some researchers when responding to ethics committees regarding proposals for qualitative in-depth research, including ethnographic studies. There is a highlighting of the “stringency” (Jewkes and Wright, 2016) of such ethics committees, and, indeed, other gatekeepers with whom prospective prison researchers must engage. For example, as well as local managers and prison governors/superintendents, there are ethics committees with which researchers must engage in criminal justice agencies.

Historically, along with much of science, both criminology and penology were male-dominated disciplines. As such, much of the accepted wisdom and knowledge surrounding imprisonment was male oriented. An in-depth understanding of women in criminal justice systems and correctional facilities was, until relatively recently, limited. Over time, feminist criminologists have expressed concern with how social structures and institutions shape and influence the position of women in society in general, and their experiences in criminal justice settings in particular, (see for example Quinlan, 2011; Renzetti, 2013; Smart, 1976).

Baldwin (2021a, 2021b) suggests that seminal conceptions of imprisonment, as contributed for example by Foucault (1977), Sykes (1958/2007) and Goffman (1961, 1963), although invaluable in their contribution to knowledge, were limited by their male-focused narratives. Feminist criminology, she

explains, does not reject this knowledge, but rather builds on it, asking important questions about how women's criminal justice experience contributes to this knowledge. Notably, a theoretical shift was called for by Gelsthorpe and Morris (1988) to challenge and add to the previously restrictive "parameters of masculinity and criminology" (p. 229). In fact, they proposed that (criminological) research to be undertaken wholly through a feminist lens.

Researchers' studying women in prison generally highlight their often extreme vulnerabilities related to the troubled and distinct characteristics, life histories, and circumstances that imprisoned women frequently report. These challenges are well documented in the literature (Baldwin, 2015, 2018; Booth, 2021; Corston, 2007; Masson et al., 2021; Quinlan, 2003, 2011, 2016, 2019; Wright, 2017). These authors and others have studied and attempted to understand and explain the traumas that very many, if not most, women bring to prison. Many of these issues are related to experiences over the life course, including housing, employment, addiction, ill-health, social relationships, motherhood and mothering that are rendered more difficult, and, in some cases, impossible, by imprisonment. Even short periods of incarceration—a sentence of 6 months or less (Baldwin & Epstein, 2017; Masson, 2019)—can significantly exacerbate women's already disadvantaged lives. While it is important that imprisoned women are not defined by these vulnerabilities (Booth & Harriott, 2021), these are, nonetheless, the fundamental realities of their lives.

In our studies, we have focused on women's incarceration and mothering experiences in prison. These explorations have prompted this journal article, and in the context of initiating a continuing critical reflection on ethical practice, we consider ethical standards in such research. We contend that a particular formation, including a deep and critical ethical reflection, is necessary for all researchers who engage in or propose to conduct research with female offenders in carceral settings. Acknowledging the challenges of a foray into such a potentially thick and thorny field, scholars who pursue research in women's prisons need to be as prepared as possible. The hope is that this article, in which we outline our own experiences and ethical reflections, along with the presentation of a new model, "An Ethic of Empathy", will provide insight into this endeavour. As well, the aim is to generate ideas for emergent researchers to chart their own way forward, forming unique paths through this particular (mine)field toward the essential goal for all of us—ethical research.

Method

This is a study of the application of feminist ethics and research practices with women in prison from three authors who identify as feminist researchers. In 1988, Gelsthorpe and Morris wrote that while feminism is difficult to

define, (and the passage of time has not ameliorated this), feminists believe that women experience subordination based on their sex. It follows that feminist researchers' working with women in criminal justice systems are doubly burdened. They perceive and understand the subordination of all women, and they have assumed the ethical obligation, clearly asserted by Scraton (2016), above, to critically examine the lives and the experiences of women who are confined in, and subordinated by, criminal justice systems.

It is often noted that many social scientists are methodological pragmatists, using the most appropriate methods to get the job done. The methodological toolbox available to them is very substantial, with a very elaborate array of options. Within the range and complexity of social science research methodology, it is difficult to pinpoint methodologies and methods that are particularly and uniquely feminist. While that is the case, some researchers, including Doucet and Mauthner (2006), and Maynard and Purvis (1994), posit that there are essential principles and characteristics that should be present in all feminist research. Those principles include ethical care, reflexivity, inclusivity, flexibility, activism, and empowerment. Activism, according to Renzetti (2013), is an essential aspect of feminism. She holds that this should be no less true of feminist criminologists. She states:

“Feminist social scientists, including feminist criminologists, strive to acquire scientific knowledge through a research process that empowers individuals and groups to act to change behaviours and conditions that are harmful or oppressive” (Renzetti, 2013, p. 12).

Therefore, in feminist research directed toward women affected by criminal justice systems, it is essential to reflect on the positioning of participating women with regard to power and control. Further, feminist researchers seek to amplify the voices of their research participants as they relate their experiences, beliefs, understandings, concerns, hopes, and aspirations. Importantly, this is to be accomplished with empathy, and with due ethical care and consideration.

The current study employed a case study design. Applying case study research methodology, the researcher engages in an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under investigation. Such a methodology is possible when the study is located in a *bounded entity*, (Quinlan et al., 2019, p. 148), in a specific space or place, or incident. In this investigation, the focus is the training and formation undertaken by the three authors to be as fully prepared as possible to conduct research ethically with women in prison and upon their re-entry into the community. The cases present in detail the experiences of the researcher in relation to preparation for the

project, and the specific ethical research concerns along with investigators' responses. Their critical ethical reflections evidence the approach taken for preparation and the degree of importance assigned to the essential level of preparation in order to ensure ethical practice.

In the initial case study, the first author outlines her journey through the Republic of Ireland's women's prisons. Explaining the background for entering these facilities and the development of the project into a PhD research study, she documents the fieldwork and data collection methods. The case delineates the ethical concerns that arose throughout the research process and the means by which they were resolved.

In the next case study, the second author discusses her work with criminalised mothers in England, detailing the feminist framework of her research with mothers in prison and upon re-entry. Similar to the first case, the ethical decision making of the researcher is highlighted.

In the final case study, the third author recounts her studies with imprisoned mothers in England, conducted as a novice researcher. She reflects on the ethical issues that arose and the process by which she addressed them.

These case studies are presented with the objective of challenging, informing, educating, and encouraging emerging scholars in the discipline. It is our hope that this article will contribute to the work of researchers in the process of developing their own ethical formation and research practice.

Case Study I: Researching in the Women's Prisons of the Republic of Ireland

There are two women's prisons in the Republic of Ireland. The Dóchas Centre, (Dóchas is the Gaelic word for hope) at Mountjoy Prison in Dublin is a relatively new purpose-built female prison which opened in 1999. Currently, it can accommodate 146 women prisoners (Irish Prison Service, Dóchas Centre). In stark contrast, the other women's prison is Limerick Prison, a predominantly male prison, the oldest operating prison in Ireland. Currently, it can accommodate 28 female prisoners (Irish Prison Service, Limerick Prison).

I began my work in the women's prison as a volunteer "befriender". In Ireland, a number of women (befrienders of women prisoners tend to be female) undertake this voluntary work. My volunteering in the women's prison developed from my first ever visit to a prison in 1998 (See Appendix 2, Quinlan, 2006). The then Governor of Mountjoy Prison, John Lonergan, and the then Governor of the Women's Prison at Mountjoy Prison, Kathleen McMahon, encouraged my volunteerism. Training for the

role was provided by a community of nuns, the Sisters of Mercy, Baggot St, Dublin.

The comprehensive training schedule required a one-morning-every-week attendance in the programme over a number of weeks. The fact that there was such a training programme and that this training was available illustrates the level of concern that exists in relation to work, even voluntary work, with women in prison. There are very many rules in relation to gaining entry to and visiting women's prisons, and, of course, the rules, processes, and protocols vary from prison to prison, and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

The training programme underscored that there were rules for relationship building with the imprisoned women we were befriending. The establishment of standards of conduct and behaviour and adherence to them assisted in building relationships of trust throughout the prison, with both staff and women inmates. There were rules, for example, about what could and could not be brought into the facility and rules about what could be taken out, requiring my showing items and receiving permission from the prison officers in charge of the gate.

As my voluntary work with the women developed, I searched for material to read about incarcerated women and the facilities that confined them. To my surprise, there was very little published at that time. This absence of women prisoners' experiences in the research literature is not unique to Ireland. It mirrors their being overlooked or forgotten globally. In fact, it was only with the development of feminist research methodology and the work of pioneering feminist criminologists (among them Carlen, 1983, 2002; Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Chesney Lind, 2006, 2020; Daly and Chesney Lind, 1988; Renzetti, 2013, Smart, 1976) that the voices of imprisoned women came to be heard. Indeed, recently, Epler and Dewey (2016) highlighted the lack of focus on women in criminal justice systems while reviewing four important ethnographic studies on incarcerated women in the USA; all four of the studies, they explain, address central issues in the lives of the female incarcerated.

Given the lack of published material on women's prison facilities and women inmates, I decided to undertake research to fill this gap in the literature. In this way, my voluntary work as a women's prison befriender led to my PhD study of women in prison in Ireland. This research, of course, raised a number of ethical issues. Among the key ethical concerns were:

- how to change my role from befriender to befriender and researcher, and how to operate within the prison in the dual role of befriender/researcher;

- given the very great level of access that I had to the prisons and to women prisoners and my consequent close relations with prison staff and imprisoned women, how all of this could be utilised ethically for my research;
- the range of proposed data-gathering methods for my study, including observation, in-depth interviews, and visual methods in the form of a photographic project, and the related ethical concerns throughout;
- my own motivations in undertaking the research-- in-depth research on the institutions--and in-depth research conducted with the detained women;
- ethical concerns related to any publication or other use of the collected data.

For the most part, these ethical concerns were resolved through openness and transparency and through clear, timely, and honest communication; it is not possible to overstate the fundamental importance of these elements. This was accomplished by explaining both the motivation for my undertaking this research and the investigation's methods and objectives to all concerned. I clarified that my objective was to write a history and produce a permanent record of women's experiences of prison in Ireland (Quinlan, 2006, 2011). I made no assumptions in relation to the research or to the study's data gathering. I had no sense of entitlement, for example, based on my work as a prison volunteer or other experience. At all times, it was important that I was circumspect in my engagement with the women in terms of the elements of any privilege I enjoyed, including liberty and education.

I formally and respectfully requested permission for my research. In the first place, I applied for and secured permission from each of the 3 respective prison governors and from the Department of Justice to conduct the research in both women's prisons. Then, I applied for and was granted ethical approval for the research from my university, the DCU (Dublin City University) Research Ethics Committee, (REC). The university's rigorous process of ethical review dealt with issues of access and permissions, including informed consent, proposed data collection methods, means of recording data, data management, publication, and study dissemination. The proposed research methodology, which was a complex and critical ethnography that drew on discourse analysis and semiotics and was informed by feminist methodology, was subjected to rigorous critique by both the dissertation supervisor and the university's research ethics committee, the REC.

I sought and secured informed consent from every woman study participant and then engaged them in the research project's data gathering methods, including in-depth interviews and photography. This was, of

course, necessary to the success of the project. The women were interested in the study and generous in their involvement. They enjoyed participating in the in-depth interviews. The process was one in which they could confide confidentially if they wished, and for as long as they wanted. In all, 83 interviews were conducted, lasting on average two and a half hours (Quinlan, 2011, p. 254). During the interviews, I photographed each woman's personal prison space, and I followed this element of the study with a series of photo-elicitation interviews, conducted with 20 women (For an in-depth account of the findings of the photographic analysis, see Quinlan, 2006, 2011). It is important to note that no individual was photographed in the process (Quinlan, 2006, p. 76), The particular focus of the photographic element was on the women's personal prison spaces, on the artefacts that they displayed, and the manner of their display in those spaces.

Each woman, in her own way, took the experience of participating in an interview as an opportunity to reflect on her life. The entire research project was dialogical—all of the participants in the study “asked back”, (Qakley, 1981, p. 30, Quinlan, 2006, p. 67). The participants wanted to know why I was recording this, and not recording that, why I deemed this significant and not that. Conversations like this happened routinely throughout the research project. I believe that the women “asked back” because I was familiar to them, and they felt comfortable with me and with my research. The fact that they responded in this manner illustrated their sense of personal power in relation to the study. The women felt powerful enough to contribute to the research process in terms of the data that they contributed and the manner in which data were gathered.

The ethical concerns that I had in relation to my dual role of befriender/researcher were resolved through openness. I explained to each woman that I, a befriender in the prison, had decided to undertake in-depth research on them and Irish women's prisons. Word of this spread rapidly throughout the prisons, and the women's response to me as researcher was supportive for the project's duration and beyond. This support was clearly expressed by one woman who said during an interview: “I know what you're doing, you're trying to explain to them out there what we're really like in here” (Quinlan, 2011, p. 258). That was, of course, precisely what I was trying to do.

My research was shaped by insights into incarcerated women's experiences afforded to me by my presence in the prison, by my development of feminist consciousness, and by the application of feminist criminology and research methodology. Key concerns that focused my study included: reflexivity and the need to constantly examine the process of research; an awareness of power and powerlessness in our dealings with others, and, in particular,

research participants; a critical awareness of the process of “othering” in research; a consciousness of the propensity of some researchers to name others without consultation—to claim to know others better than they know themselves; a critical examination of my relationship as researcher with those researched; and a dedication to the focus of the research which always was on making women’s experiences visible. My PhD research was published as a book (Quinlan, 2006, 2011). It was and remains the most comprehensive study of women’s prison experiences in Ireland.

Case Study 2: Research in Women’s Prisons in England

In this case study, I outline some of my experiences in relation to my work with women in the English criminal justice system. Undertaking doctoral and other research with criminalised women after a long career in social work, probation service, and academia prepared me to some extent for the physical, emotional, and academic demands of the research. My role as a mother and one who had shared many of the lived experiences of the mothers in my study also provided additional understanding, tools, motivation, and empathy. These, in turn, informed my ethical care and investigation design decisions which were deeply rooted in feminist thinking and methodology. While there is “*no clear consensus as to what feminist research definitionally might comprise*”, feminist research is certainly (or ought to be) adaptive, flexible, interactive, and reflexive (Maynard & Purvis, 1994, p. 2).

My doctoral research (Baldwin, 2021b) explored the long-term impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role. It was a matricentric-feminist study with a feminist methodology, thereby acknowledging the long-standing deeply structural, cultural, and multi-layered position and disadvantage that is the lived reality of women, especially as mothers. Aresti et al. (2016) argue that research participants, especially prisoners and criminalised individuals, are often excluded from the processes of research and are often entirely invisible in research products. It was, therefore, important to me and my feminist principles that this was not the case in my interactions with the women in my doctoral study. The mothers and their voices are centred, and some of them will be/have been involved in its dissemination and publications.

At the outset of my investigation, I had some reservations about speaking to women about their motherhood while they were in prison—and arguably in a powerless and vulnerable position. Women in prison have high levels of mental health needs and histories of abuse, and in 2020, women in prison in England and Wales accounted for 22% of all self-harm incidents, even

though they only made up 4% of the prison population; (Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings, Summer, 2021). Given these facts, I was mindful in my research of asking women to speak about potentially one of the most painful aspects of their lives, i.e. separation and/or consequential loss of their children. Equally, I was aware that this unease was based to a degree on my own social and personal constructions of mothering and motherhood. I understood that there were many variables that might be out of my own or the mothers' control when the one-to-one interviews I proposed for data gathering took place in prison (for example an immediate lockdown—which might mean an abrupt and uncompassionate ending to an interview at an inappropriate and emotional point). Further, I was wary that although mothers “might” have access to support in prison, they were less likely to have access to “comfort”; and given the highly emotive topic, I was concerned about the mothers' wellbeing post interview.

I have always been in awe of the ability, strength, and resilience of mothers, especially criminalised women, who mother and mother well through the most challenging of circumstances (Baldwin, 2021b; Booth & Harriott, 2021). As highlighted by Corston (2007), women and mothers are resilient and continue to mother and manage homes from prison successfully. Therefore, it was important as a researcher to “check out” my assumptions and concerns, to ensure I was not taking away imprisoned mothers' voices and choices—which would have been greatly at odds with my feminist principles. So, I undertook two research consultation sessions (RCS's), one with post-release mothers in the community, and one in a prison, with mothers with whom I was already working on a voluntary basis. These RCS's were not a source of data collection, but were an essential part of the overall research design and informed all aspects of the study. These sessions facilitated the input, agency, and voice of the women participants, and this is critical in feminist research.

The RCS mothers and I shared a collective concern that to speak about the most painful aspect of their imprisonment, i.e., the separation from their children, might prove too “emotional” and “overwhelming” and potentially “dangerous”. Thus, despite having an indication that my ethics application for prison-based research would be approved by NOMS (National Offender Management Service), I made the ethical care decision to interview mothers only at post-release. Yet, the RCS members suggested that “in prison” mothers were likely to want to contribute to the study, and it was important they “had a voice”. They felt that “writing letters” might be more appropriate, “as the women in prison would have more control that way” (e.g.; one mother wrote a six page letter—but wrote it over three-week period, putting it away when it became too emotional). For that reason, this

avenue of data collection was included, and many of the mothers asked that their “real” names be used (this was not possible because of the ethical approval process that clearly stated data would be anonymized). However, the mothers chose their own pseudonyms so that they retained ownership of their “stories”. It is worthy of note that other feminist researchers (Grinyer, 2002; Lockwood, 2013), interestingly in a similar field, i.e. research with criminalised and traditionally “voiceless” women, have described facing a similar issue and have called for it to be considered in future research and ethical applications.

As a working class woman who had been a teenage single “mum” who had lived in poverty, I was very aware that I shared many of the characteristics and traumatic experiences of some of the mothers in my research. Clearly, the study’s deeply emotive findings stem from my empathy and my roles as mother and grandmother that informed my research relationships. The mothers were comfortable with me as I was with them, illustrating Oakley’s view that good research is “*best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship*”, thereby facilitating mutuality and exchange (Oakley, 1981, p. 41). However, in feminist research, and especially where central characteristics and experiences are shared, reflexivity becomes even more important (Cooper & Rogers, 2015), and I employed what I termed a “rolling reflexivity” (Baldwin, 2021b, p. 135), discussed below, throughout the study.

Burgess-Procter (2015) suggests that seeking to “do” as well as to “understand” is not outside of feminist research principles and aims. As such, some of my relationships with the participant mothers did not end with the interview. Where and when initiated by the mothers, relationships continued. As a result, I have supported several in seeking accommodation, support, employment, and other opportunities. Further, in-keeping with feminist and matricentric principles of involvement, agency, and empowerment, I have co-produced academic writing with two of the participants and co-presented findings. I will be writing with other mothers from the study in the future.

The women described taking part in the study as a “positive”, “cathartic” experience, reporting they felt “listened” to and “heard”, sometimes “for the first time”. All were happy to know my activism and challenge continued beyond the end of the study, noting how including their voices and experiences made them feel part of my challenge, activism, and drive for change (and I continue to campaign with some of the mothers). In all research, it is important that the processes of research “do no harm” to participants (Abbott & Scott, 2019; Moore & Wahidin, 2018). Importantly, as far as is knowable, I left all the mothers in as positive of frame

of mind as possible; and I was able to exit the study “ethically and with care” (Baldwin, 2021b, p. 101).

At times, I have found there has been some resistance to the activism, reflexivity, and sometimes “messy boundaries” of my feminist research. This is perhaps evidence of feminist methodology being misunderstood, undervalued, and underestimated (Oakley, 2016). It is essential, therefore, that supervision teams and ethics committees are aware of and informed about feminist research and feminist research methodologies so as to ensure the best outcomes possible, both for participants and feminist researchers.

Case Study 3: A Novice Researching Women’s Experiences in Prison in England

In this case study, I outline my experience in conducting prison research as a novice while undertaking my PhD (Booth, 2017, 2020). I conducted interviews with imprisoned mothers and caregivers of children whose mothers were in prison (family members and friends). This research interest in maternal imprisonment stemmed from a year-long placement as a Research Trainee (RT) at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). My contribution to a report on “prisoners’ childhoods and family backgrounds” (Williams et al., 2012) showcased the distinct lack of research and policy attention to prisoners’ families in England and Wales. There is no women’s prison in Wales, and women from Wales are imprisoned in prisons in England. More recently, numerous studies have helped bridge this gap by exploring the experiences of maternal imprisonment (including; Baldwin, 2015; Freitas et al., 2016; Lockwood, 2020; Masson, 2019). However, these important contributions were not yet published when I embarked on my 2013 PhD study, funded by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Committee), and titled *Prison and the Family: An Exploration of Maternal Imprisonment from a Family-Centered Perspective*. Please note that “family-centered” places families and relationships at the heart of the study.

When I began the study, my reading of the literature very quickly indicated the challenges of conducting prison research. Martin (2000, p. 216) characterised prison as a “hidden” institution understood only by those who “live or work there”. King (2000, p. 298) stated that “no amount of theorising or researching in an office can substitute for the hands-on experience of spending your time in prison”. My pre-doctoral life had afforded access to only a handful of prisons in England on visits lasting no more than a day. I visited four male prison establishments, and one women’s prison, all located in England between 2011 and 2013 during my time as a Research Trainee (RT) at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and while studying for my Masters

in Research degree. As brief prison encounters, they provided little *real* understanding about prison, the men and women detained there, or their relationships. Three months into my PhD work, I was feeling increasingly anxious about my novice status; these early realisations and reflections led me to pause the PhD process.

The decision to pause was made in conversation with my dissertation supervisor. I had outlined the above literature in a supervision meeting and compared this against my own identity—a white, middle class female in my mid-twenties, with no children or family history of imprisonment. I highlighted the potential distance my identity might have had with women and families in my study. I explained that I intended to use the break to improve and expand my understanding—to gain “hands-on experience” of being within and around a prison via a placement. My supervisor put a name to my thought process—she told me I was “thinking and acting reflexively.”

Reflexive practices involve considering the potential influences of the researchers’ own history and positionality on the research process. It is widely acknowledged that during qualitative inquiries, the researcher’s presence shapes considerations, decisions, and interpretations throughout the process as “the product cannot be separated from the means of production” (Letherby, 2003, p. 6). Reflexive ethical practices are especially relevant when investigating sensitive issues, such as maternal separation through imprisonment.

During this time away from the PhD, I undertook a 6-month, part-time voluntary placement with the Pact Family Worker (FW) (For more information about the role of FWs, See Dominey et al., 2016) at HMP Bronzefield Women’s Prison). This position supported the imprisoned women (mothers) and their loved ones in the community, and my role mirrored the FW’s. It involved case work with a woman over a longer period of time, and it included, for instance, sustaining liaisons with social services. I also responded to enquiries from new entrants to the prison who were anxious to reconnect with their children and families. As well, I worked with loved ones (family members, friends and significant others—see Masson & Booth, 2018) who inquired about how to organise a visit or attend the visitors’ centre, answering their questions about rules and processes.

While being away from the PhD might have cost time and money, (my ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council, UK stipend was suspended during my placement, prompting the necessity to work extra jobs to pay for this deficit), the ethical gains far outweighed the hurdles. My learning was multifaceted—intellectual, emotional, personal, professional, procedural, and relational. The advanced insights and interpersonal lessons derived from the agency post were crucial when I resumed the PhD. In particular,

they were invaluable for ethical decisions concerning methodology, as explained in the examples below.

While considering data collection options, I had reservations about conducting focus groups with women in prison. I was aware that imprisoned mothers may not have spoken freely out of fear of gossip or the associated issues around lack of privacy in the institutional setting. This was often mentioned as a concern by women on my placement. For instance, in my FW role, our discussions were often moved from wings or “public” places in the prison to prevent others from “overhearing”. A quiet side office was preferable because of the privacy it provided. Likewise, I considered one-to-one research interviews more appropriate when discussing personal and sensitive topics with mothers removed from their children. This was confirmed as the interviews evoked many mixed emotions; from sadness associated with the separation, to laughter from sharing happy memories. The mothers also disclosed stories and information in the interview that they said they had not previously mentioned or “said aloud” while in prison.

A second decision informed by the FW interactions was to ensure I had met and spent time with the mothers prior to the research interview. It is widely documented that rapport is important in qualitative interviewing (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Letherby, 2003); but for me, establishing a relationship with the mothers was more about ensuring their comfort with me (as the researcher) and with the parameters and focus of the study before agreeing to take part. Understandably the sensitive nature of the study meant I anticipated the mother’s uncertainty about sharing deeply personal experiences with an unknown person. Meeting the mothers prior to the research interview did, in fact, lead some of the women to decide not to further participate, while for others, it confirmed their choice to take part. Guided by the placement, I approached data collection in this manner because I had learned how trust and openness took time to develop, and that often mothers in prison did not feel comfortable sharing information on the first meeting with a stranger. Similarly, it also reaffirmed that informed consent had been acquired, power imbalances were being reduced, and participation was more inclusive during these early stages of the project. Thus, the data collection decisions, rich findings, and ethicality of the study would not have materialised without the knowledge acquired during my time with the agency.

As social researchers, we are ethically bound to act in ways that prevent harm (British Society of Criminology, 2015). Without my placement, I am not sure I would have had the same confidence in my ethical practices while “doing” research with women in prison. I imagine that the limited exposure and lack of familiarity with criminalised women might have given me an

incomplete picture of the research process from which to build and synthesise ethical considerations during my PhD. It is because of my own experience that I question how others, and especially novices, might navigate the ethicality of researching women in carceral settings.

Discussion

In our collective research with criminalised and imprisoned women as discussed in the cases, we demonstrate the previously outlined core principles of feminist research, i.e. inclusivity, ethical care, reflexivity, and the facilitation and amplification of women's voices. Regardless of differences in our backgrounds or levels of expertise as practitioners and/or researchers, we committed to a feminist methodology, and we each delivered scholarship which centred the voices and experiences of the women in our studies. Sadly, discussions among us about our work uncovered that we all shared experiences of encounters with researchers who were not as committed to these same principles when working with criminalised women. We can see how and why potentially harmful and sometimes, arguably, exploitative research practices can be far-reaching with long-term consequences. As such, we, the authors, felt strongly that this article was needed and is justified.

Women in criminal justice systems are often incredibly resilient and strong, having frequently survived multiple challenging realities. However, criminalised women are, nonetheless, often also vulnerable, especially to the exploitation of others, particularly those in, or deemed to be in, a position of "power" over them. The researcher/researched dynamic is frequently assumed to be a hierarchical relationship. One in which the researcher holds all of the "power". Ethical care and acknowledgement of power in research settings is essential if participants are to feel they are being researched *with*, as opposed to only feeling that they are being researched *about*. Tangible steps must be taken to actively reduce any power imbalance as far as possible and to apply significant means of addressing that power imbalance. We propose that this can be achieved by moving towards An Ethic of Empathy (see Figure 1).

Empathy is frequently defined as a skill set in which a person can "put themselves in somebody else's shoes" or "feel their pain". Having empathy is important in many professions, often linked to working with potentially vulnerable individuals and in care work, including roles in medical practice (Ratka, 2018). We argue that it has relevance for researchers too—especially those working with women in criminal justice settings. The field of social psychology identifies two main types of empathy: cognitive and emotional (Hodges & Myers, 2007). Cognitive empathy generally refers to the

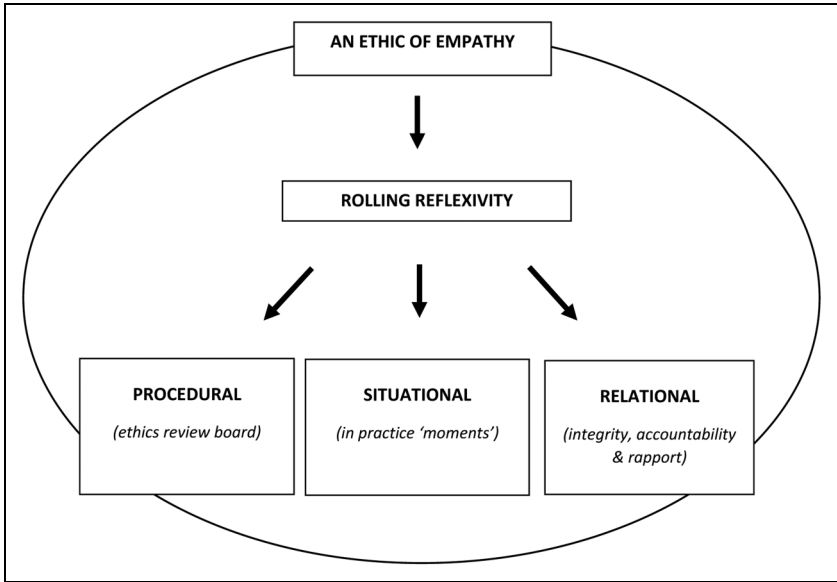


Figure 1. An ethic of empathy.

perceptive abilities of one person to see and understand the emotions and positionality of another. Emotional empathy is linked to the physiological response by the empathetic person and, specifically, their ability to share the feelings of the other person.

As the model illustrates, this empathetic approach should be all encompassing as applied to research and work with women in prison. Key to ensuring continued awareness is “rolling reflexivity” in which the researcher is constantly reflecting on their assumptions and positionality, and the decisions and actions being undertaken. As with the principles of feminist research, the model asks that real consideration and reflexivity be given *throughout* the study process. This is especially key in the early phases when planning and applying for ethical approval, and in considering how the investigation could be potentially re-traumatising of women participants in criminological research, (not least re-traumatisation based on powerlessness). As demonstrated in the case studies, we each of the three authors made research decisions by “putting ourselves in the shoes of the women” and then questioning our methodological approaches from our understanding of their position. For example, from our extended exposure, familiarity, and contact with women in prison settings we were able to develop cognitive empathy—through

befriending, via shared lived experiences and professional work, and by means of applied placement that guided ethical research decision-making. Further, the familiarity gained provided opportunities for emotional empathy, all of which facilitated our negotiation of the ethical steps in the research process (procedural, situational, and relational), (See Ellis, 2007 for more information about the different stages of ethics in research). Also relevant here is the work of Guillemín and Gillam (2004) that involved continually questioning, considering, and understanding the way in which a particular approach might be experienced by women. Enveloped within An Ethic of Empathy are empathetic practices that led to our ensuring the placing of women's needs at the center of the process.

We consider that our model, An Ethic of Empathy, highlights the importance of inclusivity and visibility in research with those affected by the criminal justice system, as suggested by Aresti et al. (2016). We also believe that it goes some way in responding to the challenge that Booth and Harriott (2021, p. 205) put to the research community. Booth and Harriott are female leaders in the criminal justice sector who have experienced imprisonment and who describe research participants' negative and positive experiences. In their writing, they asked that researchers actively consider the way in which women participants are involved and integrated into the research process so as to avoid exploitation and harm. For instance, Harriot recollects:

I thought it was weird at the time that they were talking about how they wanted to raise up our voices, but then years later I read the research on the internet and I appeared in the final paper as "Participant A", they might as well have used my prison number, and I was equally powerless in the end' (p. 205).

In proposing our model, we suggest that language is an important reflexive and ethical component. One must be mindful to the use of terms that can result in the "othering" of individuals and whole groups, and this is important from the earliest stages in a research project (Oakley, 1981), including throughout the stages of procedural ethics. We also feel strongly that integrity and rapport should be central to research with women affected by the criminal justice system. We appreciate that without cultivating these during the stages of relational ethics, in interactions and discussions, then it might not only leave the research findings hollow, but women can be left, at the least, troubled and, at worst, harmed by their participation. Again, this logic follows some of the issues highlighted by Booth and Harriott (2021, p. 209) who state that: *"failure on the part of the researcher to craft the conditions of concern, humanity, interest and honesty will leave the research interview prone to emptiness"*.

Participation in research—especially sensitive research as is usually the case for female prisoners—is a “big ask”. Baldwin (2021a), in recalling the voicing of her own trauma history, encourages researchers to keep in mind the hugeness of this “ask” of participants to retell their own lived experiences “in the name of research” (Baldwin, 2021a, p. 180). She further states that the researcher’s empathy and reaction is of vital importance, because the re-telling of traumatic lived experiences, “however sensitively handled” will “leave participants, with resurfaced feelings and potentially difficult emotions that they must quash after the interview” (Baldwin, 2021a, p. 180). Baldwin (2021a, p. 181) calls this “an honourable mindfulness” which sits as a situational ethical consideration in our proposed model of An Ethic of Empathy. We, the authors, collectively argue that in any investigation of criminalised women’s deeply personal and painful experiences, researchers must reflect on their own position and privilege (particularly concerning social class, race, and gender) and how these might impact research relationships—and indeed on the research and research outcomes. Maxey (1999, p. 203) calls this “critical reflexivity”, and states that this deep, “critical reflection” is an essential researcher space in which to explore power, identity, and purpose.

During our studies, we encountered “bumps in the road” on our “research journeys,” whether in our own learning and reflexivity, or in the challenge of undertaking the complex task of sensitively and actively facilitating the voices of those imprisoned. Our experience tells us that it is not just about providing a platform for women to speak about their trauma, but for facilitating others to “hear” them and to then prompt action. We feel we have demonstrated in our case studies the importance of an “ethic of empathy” in which we as researchers take seriously the responsibility for not only participants’ welfare and truth but also for the potential impact of their being involved in the research process. Our case studies demonstrate our own reflexive journeys and the manner in which our reflexivity clearly underpinned our research. It contributed to the value and richness of our findings, but, most importantly, to the wellbeing of our participants. We engaged in a meaningful way with the women in our studies, sometimes forming lasting and co-productive relationships. We believe this is possible for all research with women in criminal justice systems, and we trust that our proposed model, An Ethic of Empathy, indicates how this might be achieved in practice.

Summary

The growing literature exploring the experiences of criminalised women indicates the many vulnerabilities and challenges that have and often continue to

shape their lives. While it is important that work in this area appreciates the resilience and heterogeneity of women, we also believe that the complexity of ethics in conducting research with women in criminal justice settings necessitates a particular ethical preparation and one which is informed by feminist principles. As such, this article proposed a new model, conceptualized as an Ethic of Empathy, to guide those conducting such research. All three authors have researched the experiences of criminalised women and mothers, and observed the feminist ethical principles detailed and outlined.

We felt compelled to share our reflections and experiences through a case study methodology, not only to provide transparency and examples of the work, but to inform and prepare researchers entering the field. Central to our proposed model is a need to continuously appreciate and understand the lived experiences that women in criminal justice systems often display through empathetic decision-making and research practices. This is achieved through rolling reflexivity and the ability to continuously question how research approaches are experienced by women at all stages of this process, and especially in the different ways in which ethical principles are instilled—procedurally, situationally, and relationally. It is our intention that this model guide research towards reflexive and inclusive feminist practices that acknowledge the important role of empathy, power imbalances, nuance, and reflections that place women's experiences and needs at the heart of research projects in this discipline. It is also our hope that by creating and sharing our Ethic of Empathy model we might encourage further critical discussions about and engagements in the ethics of research focused on women in criminal justice systems.

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