

Research ethics beyond box-ticking exercises

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Navigating personal and practical issues in feminist qualitative research on women with lived experiences of crime and the criminal justice system

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Abstract

We live in a time when research ethics is more regulated than ever before. In 2004 Sweden became the first country in the world to legally require ethical reviews across all research disciplines. In 2019 the Ethical Review Authority was created as a national body to increase uniformity and efficiency in review processes (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, 2023). These processes are not without criticism. There are concerns that their formal, standardised format is ill-suited to identifying the ethical dilemmas that arise in qualitative research and may – in some cases – even exacerbate them or create new ethical dilemmas (Wästerfors, 2019). Some suggest that this is especially true for criminological research, which occupies a distinctly different methodological, ethical and political terrain than that of the bio-medical field, where ethical procedures were originally established (Johnstone, 2005). As procedural demands have grown, so has the distrust in researchers to self-regulate. The idea that additional rules and regulations will resolve this issue and enhance research ethics is increasingly questioned, and criminologists have been urged to develop their ethical imagination (Israel and Gelsthorpe, 2017). This paper contributes to ongoing discussions on ethical challenges and perspectives within this contemporary regulatory setting. It aims to add nuance and diversity while contributing to what Edlund et al. (2021) have described as key for the evolution of the field: keeping the ethical conversation alive.

Drawing on first-hand experiences of conducting feminist-grounded qualitative research with women with lived experiences of crime and the criminal justice system, this paper reflects on the navigation of personal and practical issues in research ethics that go beyond box-ticking exercises. The paper begins with a brief review of the literature on ethical regulatory trends and approaches and links

it to wider questions of methodology. It then reflects on personal fieldwork experiences and ethical considerations within this context, exemplified by issues such as consent, perceptions of harm, the impact of bureaucratic and institutional restraints on ethical ideals, and researcher well-being – which can be conceptualised in an ethical framework via, for example, empathy fatigue and grief in the research process. The paper concludes with a call for a collaborative, dialogic conceptualisation of ethical practice that, instead of box-ticking and rule compliance, promotes ongoing self-reflexive and collegial ethical discussions and responsibilities.

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Vi lever i en tid då forskningsetik är mer reglerad än någonsin. År 2004 blev Sverige det första landet i världen att införa lagkrav att forskning inom alla discipliner ska genomgå etisk granskning. 2019 skapades Etikprövningsmyndigheten som ett nationellt organ för att öka enhetlighet och effektivitet i granskningsprocesser (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, 2023). Dessa processer har inte varit utan kritik, speciellt att det formella och standardiserade formatet är dåligt lämpat för att fånga upp etiska dilemman som kvalitativa forskare hanterar, och kan till och med – i vissa fall – skapa nya etiska betänkligheter (Wästerfors, 2019). Vissa menar att detta är särskilt sant för kriminologisk forskning, som upptar en distinkt annorlunda metodologisk, etisk och politisk terräng än det biomedicinska området som de etiska granskningsprocesserna grundas i (Johnstone, 2005). I takt med att kraven på formella processer har vuxit har även misstroendet för forskare att självreglera ökat. Idéen att ytterligare regler och förordningar kommer att ta itu med detta och göra forskningen mer etisk ifrågasätts dock alltmer, och kriminologer uppmanas att vidareutveckla våra etiska visioner (Israel and Gelsthorpe, 2017). Denna artikel syftar till att bidra till den växande litteraturen som diskuterar etiska utmaningar och perspektiv i denna specifika regleringskontext, med det övergripande målet att bidra till vad Edlund et al (2021) har beskrivit som nyckeln till vidareutvecklingen av detta område, det vill säga; att hålla det etiska samtalet vid liv.

Med utgångspunkt i erfarenheter av att bedriva feministisk forskning med kvinnor med erfarenheter av kriminalitet och straffrättsliga system kommer artikeln att kritiskt reflektera över hur forskare kan navigera det personliga såväl som det praktiska inom forskningsetik som sträcker sig bortom 'box-tickande' övningar. Artikeln inleds med en kort genomgång av litteraturen som kritiskt diskuterar etiska regler och tillvägagångssätt. Den går sedan vidare med att reflektera utifrån egna erfarenheter från fältet och etiska värderingar och dilemman inom dessa, exemplifierat av en diskussion i områden såsom komplexitet inom samtycke, definitioner av skada, rollen av byråkratiska

och institutionella regler för etiska valmöjligheter, samt hur forskares välbefinnande kan förstås inom ramen för etiska övervägandena via till exempel empati-trötthet och sorg i forskningsprocessen. Artikeln konkluderas med en uppmaning till en kollaborativ, dialogisk konceptualisering av etisk praktik, som istället för 'box-tickande' och regelefterlevnad främjar fortlöpande självreflekterande och kollegiala etiska diskussioner och ansvarstaganden.

Keywords

Ethics, ethical review and regulation, qualitative research, feminist methods, criminology, women and crime

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Introduction

Ethical regulations have developed significantly in the recent era. Since the Nuremberg Code of 1947, a number of major ethical statements – with homogenising intentions and thrusts – have been established (Israel, 2015). Often, they have come about as a response to ethical crises or scandals, put in place to try to re-build confidence in research (Johnstone, 2005). What they all share is that they are based on bio-medical research (Edlund *et al*, 2021); none of them have been developed with the methodologies and ethical concerns that social scientists face in their day-to-day realities. In consequence, some social scientists argue that prevailing ethical clearance procedures are less applicable to social research practices (Wästerfors, 2019; Alvesson & Stephens, 2024). It has been argued that this is especially true for criminological research, due to how it occupies a distinctly different methodological, ethical and political terrain than the medical field (Johnstone, 2005).

Sweden is one of the countries that have embraced the ethical regulatory trend wholeheartedly and in 2004 Sweden became the first country in the world to make it a legal requirement to ethically review all research disciplines.¹ In 2019 the Ethical Review Authority was created as a national body in Sweden with the aim to increase uniformity and efficiency in review processes (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, 2023). These laws have, however, recently come under critique, especially in terms of how the system applies to social science research and that the law is centred on control rather than dialogue (Regeringskansliet, 2024). Following a governmental review of the Swedish law linked to this critique, there are current proposals to alter the law that governs ethics in Sweden. For example, there are suggestions to move away from a centralised system for all research, to one where *some* social science research will be reviewed on an institutional level (*ibid.*).²

1. For an overview of how ethical regulatory practices compare across countries, see for example Israel (2015).

2. At the time of writing, these proposals are out for consultation.

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Ethical regulatory trends in the Nordic setting, as well as the growing culture of regulation globally, must be situated in the context of wider social shifts. Israel (2015) argues that the rise of the audit culture, public scepticism towards science, risk-driven ideals in management, as well as an overall increase in individual accountability – trends that are all especially pronounced in the Global North – make up an important backdrop for understanding regulatory developments. Some argue that these shifts denote that official ethical review practices primarily have come to be about managerial insurance arrangements (Alvesson & Stephens, 2024). Moreover, from a critical standpoint, these processes cannot be disjoined from questions of power. While some authors highlight the role of power in ethical regulation in terms of neocolonial moral imperialism (see for example Chattopadhyays, 2011), others draw attention to how standardised regulatory practices push normative ideas of quality and knowledge production in research (Edlund et al, 2021; Winlow and Measham, 2017).

In this contemporary context, procedural demands have grown in parallel with a distrust in researchers to self-regulate. Some refer to current ethical processes as a form of exam that researchers are called to (Edlund et al, 2021), others as administrative box-ticking (Rahman & Deuchar; 2024). In a recent study into academics' views of ethical clearance by Alvesson & Stephens (2024), it was found that the process is commonly viewed as meaningless and absurd, generating high levels of cost and frustration as well as undermining professional values. Furthermore, it is also a process that have paved the way for shifting perspectives on ethics. That is, a suggested view has taken form that as long as projects and researchers follow set rules and regulations, research will become more ethical (Edlund et al, 2021; Cannella and Lincoln, 2011). Cannella and Lincoln (2011) note that this idea, that rules can be set in advance and will by design lead to 'good' research, falls into a traditionalist understanding of research practice that chime especially poorly with certain strands of research. For example, writing from an ethnographic viewpoint, Wästerfors (2019) argues that for research that focus on individual interactions and situational spontaneity, where methodological flexibility is essential, the form-based ethical review format provides an especially meagre system as it struggles to capture, or indeed predict, what ethical concerns that may appear. A consequence may be that researchers misrepresent their project, giving a false picture of predictability, or alternatively, avoid certain projects altogether (Edlund et al, 2021; Alvesson & Stephens, 2024).

In this reflective piece I draw on my personal and practical experiences of conducting feminist qualitative research with women with experiences of crime and criminal justice as a springboard to critically discuss the tricky terrain of research ethics beyond box-ticking exercises. Calls have been made for criminological researchers to share, and critically reflect on, ethical difficulties and dilemmas that they face linked to ethical regulatory mechanisms, with the hope that it will promote change and encourage a deeper dialogue about



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ethics proper (Israel and Hay, 2012). In view of current regulatory reviews in the Swedish setting, it is arguably an especially apt time to respond to such a call. Moreover, in an attempt to counteract what has been suggested to be a pre-occupation in criminological texts with how to best meet official rules (Winlow and Measham, 2017), the article also aims to raise alternative ethical questions than those typically posed in formal ethical procedures. Criminology as a field tackles issues that are inherently sensitive, including potentially unreported criminal behaviour; the sharing of which can come at a particular cost to those who participate (Cowburn, Gelsthorpe and Wahidin, 2017). Fieldwork situations often also entail a blurring of the boundaries between researcher and participants (Rahman & Deuchar, 2025). The reflections offered in this text may thus be especially relevant for those in and around the field of criminology. However, recognising the significant overlaps in ethical issues with other fields that involve marginalised populations, such as social work (Smith, 2017), many reflections are likely to be applicable beyond the specifics of criminological research.

Following an initial section that locates the discussion of ethics in the context of methodology and a brief section on the reflection-on-experience method, the paper goes on to exemplify strategies for navigating ethical concerns that go beyond box-ticking exercises. Core themes include consent-seeking processes, perceptions of harm, challenges in staying true to one's ethical ideals, and the role of researcher wellbeing in ethical considerations. The article is brought to a close with a few concluding reflections and suggestions for future directions.

2. Ethical discussions and methodological positioning

Ethical frameworks and discussions of them are inevitably interconnected to wider methodological questions and positions. As a result of qualitative researchers' challenges to historically dominant ideas of value-free social science, more pluralistic and inclusive ethical-political frameworks have emerged (Christians, 2011). Critical and feminist ethics form a key part of these developments. In my research practice, I adhere to a feminist methodological ethos, which has consequences for how I navigate ethical concerns. While a complete discussion of how I conceptualise and operationalise feminist methods in my research rests outside the remit of this article,³ as it forms a foundation to the navigation of the personal and the practical in research ethics, some broad pointers to what it connotes are essential. Bloom (1998) describes feminism as an internally persuasive discourse that guides everyday action and a way of being in the world. It is a theory and practice that 'inform our lives' (Kelly *et al*,

3. As does the lively feminist debate around essentialist notions in ethics. Key to state is that in this text a 'feminist' rather than 'feminine' ethics is accentuated, to mark the rejection of the idea that women are somehow more naturally able to conduct ethical research (Steiner, 2021).

1994: 28). Due to this, it is a position that – for those who align with it – often blur the boundaries between the personal and the professional. It is often exactly in this blurred space that ethical decision-making takes place. Indeed, a core part of feminist research practice is that you incorporate, rather than deny, the self in one's research. Sensitivity, honesty, empathy, reciprocity and emotion take prominence over objectivity and detachment (Oakley, 1981). This position has important implications for interactions in the field and the construction of an ethical research practice. For example, dialogue with participants, where the researcher also is open to answering questions and making disclosures, is seen as an important part of the research meeting. So is an outspoken aim to – though not claiming to achieve 'purity' or perfection in ethical practice (Steiner, 2021) – reduce power hierarchies in research encounters.

To allow emotion and empathy into the research practice is seen as a methodological strength; something that can act as a useful guide to subtle processes and help connect individuals and experiences. In contrast, excluding emotion and personal involvement leaves connections – emotional, intellectual and experiential – between the researcher and the researched unscrutinised and accordingly, undertheorised (Behar, 1996). Studies have shown that allowing emotion into an interview setting can contribute to participants experiencing the interview as positive. In their study into rape survivors' experiences of participating in research, Campbell et al (2010) found that emotional responses were important for participants to experience the interview as comforting, supportive and healing. Here the aspect of care is brought to the forefront. Steiner (2021), writing on feminist ethics in journalism, notes how differences in the levels of how much care people receive, as well as provide, is an important political question. In turn, this relates to ethical practices in research and how care is conceptualised within such. Steiner (2021) goes on to question the idea that care is something that is reserved for the private sphere and calls for care to also be extended to strangers and distant communities. Here feminist-orientated research shares much with other critical strands of social research, including radical criminology (Rahman & Deuchar, 2025), that is; an ethical and analytical standpoint that not only addresses oppression but that promotes solidarity with distant, excluded as well as marginalised populations (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011). Ground values of this type will inevitably impact on one's research practice, ranging from the type of research questions one poses, to how data is collected and what voices that are prioritised within such (Eliasson, 1995).

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3. Method: Reflection-on-experience

What is put forward in this article is a form of reflection-on-experience (Johns, 2021) that can aid in the visualisation of how current policies and practices play out in researchers' day-to-day lives. Through using critical reflexivity

in ethical discussions – a common approach in feminist and radical ethics (Canella and Lincoln, 2011) – and interweaving these with other authors' reflections, I explore tensions and complexities within ethical decision-making and procedures. To make reflections meaningful, Behar (1996) argues that you must allow for 'vulnerability writing', that is, using a personal voice and experiences that can lead researchers and readers into multiple ways of seeing issues and concerns. This form of writing is not straight-forward and comes with some risks, especially in terms of exposing oneself to critique from those who deny the role of subjectivity and argue that research is about reporting on impersonal social 'facts' (ibid.). Moreover, as argued by Atkinson (2020), to make personal reflections valuable, they must move beyond self-indulgence. With this in mind, the aim here is to raise reflections from the field that directly speak to the topic at hand; they represent a small selection of fieldwork experiences that have been chosen for the specific purpose of shedding light on tensions between formalised ethical processes and real-life research practices. While recognising that it can be hard to critique ethical control, as it may be interpreted as trying to circumvent it (Edlund et al, 2021), it should be made clear that the objective is in no way to attempt to reduce the value of ethical considerations. Rather the opposite; the aim is to contribute to a growing literature that critically reflects on and complexify ethical considerations and practices and thus stimulate further discussions of how we can continue to develop ourselves, our research practice and the ethical procedures that govern such.

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4. Navigating the personal and the practical in feminist research with women who have offended: Reflections from the field

4.1 The complex issue of consent

In ethical regulation frameworks, the aspect of consent occupies a central space. In the review process, we develop a finetuned account of how we ensure participants have in an informed way consented to being part of the study. A key part of the process is submitting participant information sheets and consent forms. These forms are, however, as noted by other authors (Wästerfors, 2019; Rahman & Deuchar, 2025), very blunt tools to use in an actual research meeting. In criminological research specifically it has been argued that against a backdrop of meeting a participant population that may – for good reasons – be rather unwilling to openly speak about their personal experiences and actions, this unwillingness can be furthered by the brandishing of officially-formulated documents and requests for signatures (Winlow and Measham, 2017). In my research with women who have offended, many who have had conflictual experiences with governmental agencies in the past, to build a good rapport is absolutely key. Once this rapport is built,

there is a level of trust that is foundational to the interview meeting. Formal papers can certainly be disruptive to this. It is not rare that when I pull out the formal paperwork, I am met with a raised eyebrow and comments such as ‘*I can’t be bothered reading stuff like that*’, or alternatively; ‘*Oh I trust you, I don’t need to read this*’. Discussing the research informally is in the vast majority of cases the absolute most effective way to communicate the research, what it entails, and the meaning of consent. Moreover, trust is an aspect that is ethically significant to consider in more depth in consent-seeking processes. It interacts with both care and empathy and is essentially about the trustor’s expectation of the trusted party’s good will towards the trustor (Koehn, 1998). The ability to trust must also be situated in the context of previous experiences of giving trust. For many women in the criminal justice system for example, trust is a delicate issue. Research show that it is not uncommon for this population to have an inability to trust, often as a result of an adaptive strategy to survive (Gomm, 2016). Trust can in addition be negatively impacted by abusive experiences (Hackett, 2017). Hence, it is not something that is given lightly by women I meet, and being the receiver of it comes with a responsibility. Rather than pointing at a consent form being signed, could more suitable ethical questions be: What is the most ethically sound way to communicate consent with this particular group, how do we develop trust during this process and importantly, how do we honour that trust?

Moreover, the written consent form sends a problematic message that once consent has been given, it is done. Formal ethical procedures can thus act to discourage a dynamic and continuous consent-seeking process (Israel and Hay, 2012). In critical and feminist research ethics, consent is interpreted as an ongoing procedure; what is often referred to as *process consent* (Denzin, 2010). For processual interpretations of consent, other tools than written forms may be more suitable. For example, emotional responsiveness is arguably crucial for a more attuned consideration of consent. It can be about a feeling, a ‘vibe’. I have experienced a couple of interviewee meetings where the woman has formally consented to participation but has then communicated non-consent in other ways. A key illustration is body-language; an alternative communication strategy that is essential to tune in to in criminological research encounters (Buckland and Wincup, 2005). I recall one interview vividly, where the woman had crossed arms and expressed a loud sigh at every attempt at a question. The consent form was irrelevant at this point. The most ethical thing to do was quite obviously to end the interview as the participant clearly communicated being annoyed. Another obvious example is a simple no-show. In a recent project I had had contact with a woman over a month’s time, we had exchanged numerous emails and she kept reiterating she was very keen to participate. She had re-booked the interview at two occasions. We had finally agreed on a time and place in her local area, and I turn up and I wait ... and I wait. I call her mobile only to find out that the number is not currently in use. A clearer non-consent is hard to get. As argued by Wästerfors (2019), the

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idea that participants feel forced to take part in a qualitative study is actually rather small and participants' freedom to turn their back on the researcher is, in reality, quite significant.

A fundamental question in everyday ethics is indeed how to interpret re-bookings, cancellations and no-shows. How many times is too many to re-book? When does it amount to 'sociological stalking' that Sharpe (2017) has written about within the context of conducting longitudinal criminological research with women, in which an over-surveilled and highly stigmatised population is repeatedly re-traced for research purposes? Sometimes I have received written explanations to why a participant has changed her mind or done a no-show, stating things such as *'I have realised I am not ready to share my experiences yet, it's too painful'*. To share some of the most challenging experiences of your life takes a lot of strength, and some participants may – rightly so – feel willing to participate one day and not the next. The ethical question of how to handle re-bookings is closely related to the researcher accepting fewer interviews, which can come with implications for funding rapports and publishing opportunities. In my experience, to accept fewer interviews can make the research more ethically sound, though this necessitates that the researcher puts ethical values ahead of institutional demands. This must in turn be situated within the broader context of a growth in careerism in the academy in general, inextricably intertwined with the 'publish or perish' ethos and a drive for quantity ahead of quality, which criminology is certainly no exception to (Winlow and Measham, 2017). While I in my early research career would have continued to re-book interviews as many times as I could, I now interpret a second or third cancellation as a silent way of saying *'I am not ready to share these experiences'*. On a few occasions, it goes exactly against what the person expresses in writing. As noted by Hackett (2017); obtaining consent should be regarded as a core researcher skill. It is moreover a skill that is closely linked to the development of our professional judgements, which is a key aid in the ethical decision-making of when and how to deviate from the research plan and interview numbers (Edlund et al, 2021). Dialogue-based ethical formats may aid us to create alliances for continued reflexive insights that can support such skill developments (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011). It may also encourage us to ask other questions about consent than what the form-based ethical format does, such as: in what way are processual conceptualisations of consent integrated into the research process as a whole?

4.2. Perceptions of harm

Protection against various forms of harm and risk of harm to participants is a foundational aspect of ethical regulations (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). However, traditionally harm in research – originating in the biomedical sciences – has been constructed to be about physical harm. As noted by Israel (2015), in social sciences it is more likely that research participation can lead to other things than physical injury, such as psychological distress, discomfort and invasion of

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privacy. The point has been made, though, that there is a very weak evidence base for the idea that social scientific research carries so many risks of harm that the ethical review forms and boards are portraying (Wästerfors, 2019; Campbell *et al*, 2010). Evidence does for example not support that being upset in an interview context is always a negative experience (Campbell *et al*, 2010). This will, however, be related to *how* stories are received. Flexibility and variation are vital for ethical practice in this area. At times, it is more ethical to steer away from for example traumatic memories in an interview setting. At other times, it is arguably more ethical to do the opposite, that is, to give them space and prioritise them above whatever the interview guide instructs. Again, this links to the wider methodology. In feminist ethics, human relations and interdependence are central, and the interview meeting prioritises empathetic and attentive listening (Steiner, 2021). A research meeting provides a rather unique space for sharing experience. The women that I meet in my research have all had experiences of telling their story in conditioned ways. For instance, the women need to give a narrative of self-regulation to a probation officer, of drug-abstinence to a drug support worker, and one of good motherhood to a social worker in a custody errand. Many of them have expressed a sense of liberty in being in a space where they can tell their story without the potential of provision; I cannot grant them a less intrusive sentence, a drug script, or visiting rights to their children. This creates a very unique opportunity for narrating a life-story⁴. This does, however, come with certain ethical challenges on both practical and personal levels.

During my PhD fieldwork I interviewed a woman who was convicted of sexual offences against her children. She denied both the crimes and any wrongdoing, but this had not been made obvious to me pre-interview. This was an interview that was hugely ethically challenging, as my ethical principles led me to validate her story and be the empathetic ear that she evidently wanted/needed. However, it was challenging due to that my empathy was not genuine; I simply did not believe her (a rare experience). As the interview progressed, I also slowly realised that it would be an interview that I would not be able to use, as she so fiercely denied the offences (and therefore it was impossible to talk about anything desistance related). Nevertheless, I made the judgement that the ethical right thing was to not let this on and continue the interview to the end. It was an interview that led to extensive critical self-reflections in terms of honesty and genuinity in my research practice. Some of these overlap with ethical dilemmas highlighted by for example Smith (2017) in terms of care and solidarity with participants expressing racist views. Core ethical questions in this sphere thus include: Are there limits to the principle of solidarity, if so what are they, and how should they be acted on (or not) in a research meeting?

4. Although of course, they will know I have a particular interest in hearing experiences that link to criminality and desistance, which inevitably will colour how they construct their life-story.



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Another aspect of providing an unconditioned space for sharing life-stories is that it can offer a setting where experiences are shared for the first time. I have had a number of interviews over the years where the woman has said something along the lines of *'I've never really shared this before, but ...'*. Commonly what follows is a disclosure of an abusive and/or traumatic experience. Researching sensitive topics, maybe especially so within criminological settings where personal stories about both harm and harming are commonplace, places a particular ethical onus on the researcher in terms of responding in a suitable way (Cowburn, 2017). How such responsibility is handled is a core ethical question, and one that interconnects with perceptions of harm. As noted, research should aim to minimise the risk of harm or discomfort to participants. Harm and discomfort are, however, not clear-cut concepts. The women I have interviewed often have reactions to what they share that clearly indicate distress; they may cry, shake, or stare out in space in silence. Sometimes we take a break, but often in these emotionally intense moments of sharing, it is actually very few who want to take a break. It is not uncommon that it is after these interviews, where obvious psychological discomfort has been present, that the woman says that it was a really positive experience. What does this say about conceptualisations of harm, distress and discomfort? Campbell et al's (2010) study into the impact of participating in interview research on rape survivors found that the overwhelming majority experienced the interview as helpful, supportive and insightful. Feminist interview principles of reducing hierarchy/reinstating control, providing information and communicating warmth were identified as factors that were specifically beneficial to making the experience a positive one. This feeds into a larger literature that shows that sharing of stories can have therapeutic meaning and aid in the creation of coherence in a life-story (see for example Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). On the other hand, it is equally ethically important to read when a participant do not wish to share experiences. This I find is a skill that has taken years to develop, and one that is hard to teach. Definitely in my early years doing research I would ask one too many questions. An illustrative excerpt from one of the first interviews I did during my PhD: *'Well I had experiences of abuse when I was little, so it took me a while to deal with X'. 'Ok, could you share something about those experiences?'. 'No'. [awkward silence]. 'No, of course' [awkward silence].* As I have developed my interview skills, I would now never ask such a question. I have learnt that if a person wishes to share such experiences, I do not need to directly ask for them. An invitation to share can be communicated through an attentive facial expression. In my experience, the women themselves are the uttermost capable judges in terms of what is risky or harmful for them to share during this specific research encounter, on this specific day. Without doubt, to be attentive and have situated responses to such judgements creates in my view a more ethical social research practice than any pre-determined form-filling about harm or perceptions of such ever can or will.



4.3. *How to stay true to one's ethical values in an institutional regulatory setting*

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It is important to critically consider how marginalisation can be reproduced through bureaucratic and/or institutional practices. In their study into academics' experiences of ethical review processes, Alvesson and Stephens (2024) found that ethical practice is often subordinate to and repressed by bureaucratic processes. In criminological research especially, it often exists a huge disconnect between the world that fieldwork is conducted within and the institutional settings where ethical decision-making takes place (Winlow and Measham, 2017). Here I will use an illustrative example of a conflict between being able to compensate participants for participation in my research, versus being able to keep their trust, anonymity and confidentiality. Compensating participants in research is a debated subject. Arguments against reimbursement are generally centred around aspects of valid consent, that it, the idea that participant may feel pressures to continue participation (Gelinas et al., 2018). Sometimes even a simple 'thank you' can be critiqued and interpreted as a persuasive element in research (Wästerfors, 2019). This shows the extremes of how far removed some ethical review processes are from the everyday interactions that qualitative research commonly involve. In contrast, in an ethics of care, payment to participants is commonly regarded as a core ethical condition for research engagement. This is especially true in the context of contemporary economic conditions of precarity (Warnock et al, 2022). Sharpe (2024), researching young women with experiences of criminal justice, have argued that not offering anything in return for research participation may in fact re-reproduce harm to this group particularly, which is often marginalised, devalued and stigmatised in both social and economic terms. Supporting this position, I typically always include costs for compensating participants in my research, most commonly through a voucher. To counter the argument about the impact on valid consent, I have always made clear to participants that they receive the voucher regardless if they choose to complete the full interview or not. I have never had problems securing money for such costs from funders. In this arena the main challenges appeared in administrative regulatory practices. In Sweden I was informed that if I wanted to give a voucher to a higher value than 99kr (€8.50), the participants had to be registered as employees at the university (linked to tax regulation). Bearing in mind that upholding confidentiality and anonymity are core aspects of ethical practice that should permeate the entire research process (Eldén, 2020), and that confidentiality plays a particular role in criminological research due to its subject matter being linked to behaviour that is punishable by law (Smith, 2017), to ask this group to write up all of their personal information and register as a temporary employee at a state organisation is an outright ridiculous ask. Re-visiting the aspect of trust, to ask a participant to do this would undoubtedly damage the trust in the researcher relationship. I was therefore left with the option of giving out a voucher of 99kr in exchange for typically a good few hours

of their day, sharing some of their most intricate life experiences. 99kr does not even buy you a lunch in Sweden. I consider this to be one of the most unethical practices in my research experience to date, and one that acts as an example of what Alvesson and Stephens (2024) found in their study; that true ethical practice is often subordinate to and repressed by bureaucratic processes. It is additionally an illustration of how regulatory practices may in fact contribute to the further marginalisation of already penalised groups.

4.4. *Ethics beyond the box-ticking: Reflecting on researcher wellbeing, grief, and empathy fatigue*

When discussing ethics, a question we speak very little of is researchers' wellbeing (Edlund *et al*, 2021). This is an area that has been described as 'an invisible issue' (Skinner *et al*, 2023: 4). Skinner and colleagues (2023) have recently empirically explored how emotionally challenging research impact on researchers, both professionally and personally. The findings in their study show that researchers who research such topics commonly experience symptoms that are linked to secondary trauma, including having trouble concentrating, having negative emotions, thinking about the research (especially distressing parts of it) when not intending to do so, as well as feeling sad or guilty about the inability to improve participants' situations. A minority also experienced symptoms that would be categorised as more severe indicators of secondary trauma, such as having memory gaps, feeling jumpy, or consciously avoiding certain people or places. Indeed, many areas of criminological research require bearing witness to trauma (Moran and Asquith, 2020). This may be especially relevant for those of us who focus on women in offending contexts, as this is a group that carries particularly high levels of trauma (Petrillo, 2019). The role of hope and motivation is key in this context, as it has been found that the cost of the emotional labour can be justified if impact on policy and practice is experienced as possible (Moran and Asquith, 2020). A sense of hopelessness can, however, do the opposite. As noted by Behar (1996), anxiety is not an uncommon response to unhelpfulness, as is a feeling of being complicit with structures of power, or an inability to reduce the suffering of others. A relevant ethical question that arises is thus; how are aspects such as wellbeing, hope and motivation attended to and addressed within the research team? This is an area that also overlaps with questions of methodology and how much personal involvement a researcher allows into the research, as well the researcher's personal connection to the research theme (Stevens-Wood and Attfield, 2024).

During my PhD fieldwork I interviewed a woman who I came to call 'Jasmin'. We were rather close in age and in the introductory chat, we discussed areas where we grew up in Sweden. Me having returned to Sweden temporarily for this research project after numerous years abroad often led to questions about my earlier life. We soon realised that we had – in a brief part of our younger lives – grown up in the same small area of Sweden. It was not unlikely that



our paths had crossed during our teenage years. We shared personal stories about specific areas, people and experiences, some of which were emotionally challenging for both of us. The interview that followed was very sincere and uncensored. Jasmin had lived a tough life carrying a lot of traumas with her, both from what had been done to her, but also from what she had done to others. My meeting with Jasmin stayed with me and I reflected extensively on it, how our paths were likely to have met earlier in life, and then again circa 15 years later, in a different part of Sweden, in a research setting. Four months later I received a phone call from the 'gatekeeper' who had arranged my contact with Jasmin and informed me that she had taken her own life. I did not know how to respond to this; I was overwhelmed with emotion. On a personal level, I wanted to grieve for her, but I did not feel entitled to. On a practical level I faced the challenge of that I had not yet transcribed her data, which now felt like an overwhelming task. What did I miss in her interview? If I would have transcribed it earlier, could I have read the signs? How could I do her data justice, but at the same time not give her story undue privilege? What was the ethically correct thing to do? I am not alone with these experiences. Studies into ethical dilemmas in criminological fieldwork have found that feelings of personal loss and emotional risks from participants dying and human tragedy is an area many researchers' face, but spend very little time discussing (Worley *et al*, 2016).

Experiences of working with qualitative criminological research that is emotionally challenging are, however, often not as acute as they were in the situation with Jasmin's death but of a more slow-burning nature. As I highlighted above, for some participants the research interview offers a unique space for making disclosures. Rahman & Deuchar (2025) note that not being open to tough experiences that the participant wishes to share may reinforce emotional isolation that many individuals with offending experiences battle with. Although I had some research experience within feminist organisations that work with violence against women before starting my PhD, I was in no way prepared for the level of violence, abuse and trauma I would meet in these interview settings. Bearing in mind the methodological ideals and the role of validating stories and attentive listening in feminist research ethos, I believe that I should be empathetically available for a participant in whatever they wish to share. However, about halfway in through my fieldwork, I realised that I could no longer stay true to this ideal. I remember a specific train journey very vividly, on my way to an interview, jotting down some notes in my fieldwork diary; '*please no stories of incest today, please no stories of sexual abuse today*'. But there were those stories (as there so often are). I remember my pulse going up and I needed to concentrate on staying in the room and receiving her story in an appropriate way, communicating warmth and empathy. Although I could not put words on it then, I understand this now as experiences of empathy fatigue, as an accumulative effect of being the receiver of traumatic stories over an extended period of time. It led me to a point where I needed

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to take a break from fieldwork. However, this is not a luxury that everyone has. How secure a position that an academic holds has for example been shown to have relevance for how able researchers feel to tackle the impact of symptoms linked to secondary trauma, as do whether you have received training for how to deal with such impacts (Skinner *et al*, 2023). I would argue that it should be seen as a core part of institutional responsibility to create a collegial setting where ethics can be discussed in a broader sense, beyond tips about ethical application form-filling, and foster a research community that is open for continuous ethical discussions that relate to participants as well as researchers. A final ethical question to raise is thus; what infrastructures do research institutions offer researchers in terms of managing the impact of their research on the self, and what support is made available to allow them to stay true to core ethical ideals?

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5. Concluding reflections and future directions

This article has offered reflections-on-experience (Johns, 2021) as illustrative examples of ethics in qualitative criminological research that goes beyond box-ticking experiences, and how such can be navigated on both the personal and the practical level. Through allowing for 'vulnerability writing', I have aimed to resist the tendency to depersonalise one's connection to one's research (Behar, 1996) and instead use subjective reflections as a tool to shed light on everyday ethical practices and realities. Rather than coming across as self-indulgent, my hope is that the sharing of these reflections contributes to the growing literature that critically complexify current ethical practices and regulations. To re-iterate, the objective here is in no way to minimise the role of ethical consideration in research. Rather, it is the opposite; it is to highlight the complexity, importance and constraints of them. This is especially important to do at a time when on the one hand, research ethics policies are suggested to have disciplining effect on the criminological field (Israel and Gelstorp, 2017), and on the other, the legal framing of formal ethical procedures are being re-evaluated within a Nordic context (Regeringskansliet, 2024).

For the vast majority of the dilemmas and scenarios I have discussed, the formal ethical review process has done nothing to help me navigate. This is an experience shared by many academics. Rather than ensuring more responsible, honest and reflexive researchers, ethical clearance processes have been found to trigger cynical and instrumental approaches to ethics (Alvesson & Stephens, 2024). Likewise, to put forward this argument is in no way a call for *more* forms and procedural requirements. The belief that standardised review processes can ensure more ethical social science research practices is, I would argue, flawed. Core ethical dilemmas and considerations play out in micro-interactions of everyday scenarios; they can be as subtle as a reaction to a story shared, a decision to not make another phone call, or indeed taking



a break from fieldwork in order to be able to stay true to one's ethical ideals. Ethical considerations are situational and reactionary, they are both gradually accumulative and acute, and they are arguably best dealt with in a dialogic and critically reflective context with researchers who share similar experiences. Israel and Gelsthorpe (2017) argue that for current ethical practices to be challenged, criminological researchers need to develop our ethical imaginations. Some of the questions posed in this paper could potentially offer some prompts for stimulating such developments. There may furthermore be organisational routines that could be conducive to engage with for developing such imaginations in more collective manners. I would accordingly like to conclude with support of the idea of a more communitarian mode of ethics (Christians, 2011), that challenges individualistic notions of the researcher (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011), and a call for more collaborative and dialogical ethical formats that promote ongoing ethical discussions. While not claiming to be able to guarantee complete mitigation of ethical risks in criminological research (Rahman & Deuchar, 2025), making such spaces an expected part of any research project, irrespective of academic positions and institutional conditions, could arguably offer a better map for navigating everyday realities of ethical decision-making that goes beyond box-ticking exercises.

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