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Feminist Ethics and Research with Women in Prison

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Abstract

In this paper, we propose a new model, An Ethic of Empathy, as a guide for researchers, particularly novice researchers. This model emerged from our concerns in relation to ethics and research with women in criminal justice systems. The key concern is the vulnerability of women in and after prison, and the relatively powerful positions of social scientists researching the experiences of women in these circumstances. We believe that the complexity of ethics in such research necessitates a particular ethical preparation, involving formation, reflection, understanding, commitment, care and empathy. We outline three cases, documenting our own ethical formation as researchers.

Introduction

In this article we explore the issue of ethics and research with women in prison. We have, all three of us, researched the experiences of women in prison, women in criminal justice systems, women and social justice, and women's experiences of social control. We critically engaged with women's experiences of imprisonment, women's lived experience of prison space, and women's experiences of motherhood and mothering in and after prison. We have long reflected on the pains of imprisonment while reflexively engaging with our own outsider perspectives. We are fundamentally concerned with the power of the researcher and the profound ethical issues that this raises, in particular, for research with

women in prison. We believe that these issues have a level of complexity that necessitate a particular ethical preparation, formation, reflection, understanding, commitment, care and empathy.

We therefore suggest that research with women affected by criminal justice systems (CJS) and especially women who are still in prison, should be undertaken only after great consideration of these factors. In this paper we present three cases which outline each of our experiences, concerns and development in terms of ethics and 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, and in particular to novice researchers, as a guide to their ethical reflections and reasoning in relation to their research. We want to contribute to a continuing discussion on ethics in research with women in prison and vulnerable women in criminal justice systems. We hope through sharing our experiences to prompt a deeper and more critical engagement with research ethics.

A Brief Review of the Literature

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 the work of researchers and academics. 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.

Ethics is central to research and an in-depth understanding of research ethics is essential for every researcher. Research conducted within criminal justice systems often involves engaging with participants who have contravened the criminal code. The implications for the researcher of such research can be profound. There can be issues of personal safety and issues of professional integrity. Researchers engaging is such research may find themselves in situations where they have to stand up to and challenge power, often powerful individuals, institutions and societal structures. A good ethical foundation and formation can mean the difference between success and failure for individual researchers negotiating such challenges.

Given the fundamental importance of ethics, it not unsurprising that there are many reflections in the literature on ethics in research and ethics in research in criminal justice systems. For example, in a study undertaken with senior researchers all of whom conducted ethnographic research within criminal justice systems, Worley et al (2016), highlighted 'harrowing' experiences within which there were 'ethical dilemmas all day long'. In another example, Scraton (2017), writing about his long-term research with women prisoners in Northern Ireland, highlighted the brutalising punishments of imprisonment and the requirement of researchers in the field to bear 'witness to the pain of others'. There is a moral duty, an ethical obligation and a political responsibility, he wrote, for critical social science into penal policy and penal regimes to investigate 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, including the challenges faced by some such

committees in particular when responding to proposals for qualitative in-depth research including ethnographic research. There is a highlighting of the 'stringency' (Jewkes et al, 2016) of such ethics committees, and a highlighting of the other gatekeepers with which prospective prisons researchers must engage, ethics committees within criminal justice systems, as well as local managers, prison governors among them.

Historically, along with much of science, both criminology and penology have been male dominated disciplines. As such much of the accepted wisdom and knowledge surrounding imprisonment was male oriented. In-depth understanding concerning women in criminal justice systems and in prison was, until relatively recently, limited. Among feminist criminologists, there has been for some time a concern with how societal structures shape and influence the position of women in society in general, and their experiences in criminal justice systems in particular, (Smart, 1976, Renzetti 2013, Quinlan 2011 and 2022).

Seminal conceptions of imprisonment, as contributed for example by Foucault (1977), Sykes (1958) and Goffman (1961, 1963), though invaluable in their contribution to knowledge, were limited, Baldwin (2021) suggests, by their male focussed narratives. Feminist criminology, she explains, does not reject this knowledge, but instead builds on it, asking important questions about the contribution to this knowledge of women's experiences of criminal justice. A theoretical shift was called for, by Gelsthorpe and Morris (1988), in order to challenge and to add to the previously restrictive 'parameters of masculinity and criminology' (229). In fact, they proposed that (criminological) research to be undertaken wholly through a feminist lens.

Researchers working with women in prison generally highlight the often extreme vulnerabilities of women in prison, and the troubled and distinct characteristics, life histories, and circumstances that imprisoned women frequently report. These challenges are well

documented in the literature (Corston, 2007; Quinlan, 2003, 2011, 2016, 2019; Baldwin, 2015, 2018; Wright, 2017; Masson et al, 2021; Booth, 2021). These authors and many more have studied and attempted to understand and explain the traumas that very many, if not most, women bring with them into prison, experiences that they must try to deal with or accept and live throughout their term of incarceration. Many of these issues, including housing, employment, addiction, ill-health and relationships, motherhood and mothering, are rendered more difficult, and in some cases, impossible, by imprisonment. Even short spells in prison, of sentences 6 months or less (Baldwin and 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 and Harriot, 2021), they are fundamental realities in the lives of imprisoned women.

In our research, we have focused on studies of women's experiences in prison and their experiences of mothering in prison. It is these research experiences that have prompted this journal article. In the context of a continuing critical reflection on ethics in researching women's experiences in prison, 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 engaging in, or proposing to engage in, research with women offenders and women in carceral settings. Ethics and research with women in criminal justice systems is a very thick and potentially a very thorny field. Researchers proposing to enter the field need to be as prepared as possible. The hope is that this journal article, in which we outline our own experiences and ethical reflections, along with a presentation of our new model, which we have titled 'An Ethic of Empathy', will provide insight into this field as well as ideas for researchers in terms of their own way forward, their own paths through this particular (mine)field, toward the essential goal for all of us, that is ethical research.

Research Methodology

This article is a study of feminist ethics and research with women in prison. Each of the three authors is a feminist researcher. 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. So, 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 confined in, and subordinated by, criminal justice systems.

Many social scientists are methodological pragmatists, using the most appropriate methods to get the job done. The methodological toolbox available to social scientists very substantial, with a very elaborate array of options. Within the range and complexity of social science research methodology, it's 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;12).

In feminist research with women affected by criminal justice systems, it is therefore essential to reflect on the positioning of participating women with regard to power and control. Further, feminist researchers to seek to amplify the voices of their research participants as they relate their experiences, beliefs, understandings, concerns, hopes and aspirations. They do this with empathy, and with due ethical care and consideration**.**

The research methodology used in this project was a case study approach. Using a case study research methodology, the researcher(s) engages in an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under investigation. A case study methodology is possible when the study is located in a bounded entity, (Quinlan et al, 2019, 148), in a specific space or place, or incident. The bounded entity that is the focus of this research project is the training and formation undertaken by the three authors in order to be as fully prepared as possible to undertake ethical research with women in prison and women post release from prison.

Three cases are presented. They detail the experiences of each of the three researchers, the authors of this journal article, in relation to their preparation for their research. In each of the cases, the ethical concerns prompted by the research proposed and the responses of each of the researchers are outlined. These critical ethical reflections on the part of each of the researchers evidence their approach to their preparation for the research each one of them undertook. As will be seen, each of researchers deemed their level of preparation essential. They believe that they needed this level of preparation in order to conduct their research ethically. In order to ethically complete, publish and otherwise disseminate their research.

1. In the first case study, Christina outlines her journey into the women's prisons in the Republic of Ireland. She explains how and why she first entered the women's prisons,

and why her visits there developed into her PhD research. She explains the fieldwork that she undertook in the women's prisons, and the data collection methods used. Christina explains the ethical concerns that arose throughout the research process and the means by which she resolved them.

2. In the second case study, Lucy outlines her work with criminalised mothers in England. Lucy details the feminist research that she undertook with women, particularly mothers, in prison and upon re-entry, and discusses her ethical care decision making in relation to that research.

3. In the third case study, Natalie outlines her journey, when she was a novice researcher, into women's prisons in England. Detailing the research that she undertook with imprisoned mothers, she explains the ethical issues that arose, and the means by which she dealt with and overcame them.

We present these case studies in detail here in the hope of challenging, informing, educating and encouraging emerging scholars in the field. We hope that this journal article will contribute to the work of researchers in the process of developing their own ethical formation and research practice.

CASE STUDY 1: Christina's experience researching in the women's prisons in the Republic of Ireland

In this case study, I outline my experience of undertaking research in the women's prisons in the Republic of Ireland. There are two women's prisons. 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. It can currently accommodate 146 women prisoners (Irish Prison Service, Dóchas Centre). In stark contrast, the other women's prison is

at Limerick Prison. Limerick Prison is predominantly a male prison, and it is 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. I was, in the terminology of the women's prison, a "befriender." I befriended women in prison. In Ireland, a number of women (befrienders of women prisoners tend to be female) undertake this voluntary work. For me, this voluntary work developed from my first ever visit to a prison which took place in 1998 (See Appendix 2, Quinlan 2006). I was encouraged to develop my volunteerism by then Governor of Mountjoy Prison, John Lonergan, and by then Governor of the Women's Prison at Mountjoy Prison, Kathleen McMahon. I (along with others) was provided with training for the role by a community of nuns, the Sisters of Mercy, Baggot St, Dublin.

The training was quite comprehensive. Attendance on the training programme was required one morning every week over a number of weeks. The fact that there was such a training programme, that this training was available, evidences 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, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

On the training programme, I learned 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 prisoners. There were rules about what could and could not be brought into the facility and rules about what could be taken out. So, in response to

this rule, everything that I brought into and out of the institution, I showed to and received permission for from the prison officers in charge of the prison gate.

As my voluntary work with the women developed, I searched for material to read on the women's prisons and the women imprisoned in them. To my surprise, at that time, there was very little published. This absence of women prisoners' experiences in the literature is not unique to Ireland. It mirrors their being overlooked or forgotten across the world. It was only with the development of feminist methodology and the work of pioneering feminist criminologists (among them, Smart, 1976, Carlen, 1983, 2002, Carlen and Worrall, 2004, Daly and Chesney Lind, 1988, Chesney Lind, 2006, 2020, Renzzetti, 2013) that the voices of women in prison have been heard. Epler and Dewey (2016), in their work highlighted the lack of focus on women in criminal justice systems while reviewing four important ethnographic studies with women in prison in the USA. All four studies, as they explain, address central issues in the lives of the incarcerated women.

I decided that I would write about the women's prisons and the women detained in them, that I would fill this gap in the literature. In this way, my voluntary work as a befriender in the women's prisons led to my PhD research on women in prison in Ireland.

This research, of course, raised a number of ethical issues. Among the key ethical concerns that I had were the following:

- 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;
- the very great level of access that I had to the prisons and to women prisoners, resulting from my work as a prison volunteer, and my consequent close relations with

prison staff and imprisoned women, and concerns around how all of this could be utilised, ethically, for my research;

- the range of data gathering methods proposed for the study, including observation, in-depth interviews, and visual methods in the form of a photographic project, and the ethical concerns throughout;

- my own motivations in undertaking the research, in-depth research on the institutions and in-depth research conducted with the women inside them;

- ethical concerns related to any publication or other use of the data I collected.

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 this. I explained to everyone that I was undertaking this research. I explained why I was undertaking the research, how I was going to carry out the research, and what I hoped to accomplish with it. I explained my motivation, which was to write a history of women's experiences of prison in Ireland to make a permanent record of those experiences (Quinlan, 2006, 2011). I made no assumptions in relation to the research or to data gathering for the research. I had no sense of entitlement, based on my work as a volunteer in the prison or anything else. It was at all times important to me that I was circumspect in my engagement with the women in terms of 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 respective prison governors, there were three of them, 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, from 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, data gathering methods, means of recording data collection, data management, publication and dissemination of the research. The proposed research methodology, which was complex, a critical ethnography drawing on discourse analysis and semiotics, and 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 who participated in my study. The engagement of the women with the research and the data gathering methods, including in-depth interviews and photography, was of course necessary to the success of the research. The women were interested in the research 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 in-depth interviews were conducted with the women. The interviews lasted on average two and a half hours (Quinlan, 2011, 254). During the interviews, I photographed each woman's personal prison space. 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, 2021. No individual was photographed in the process (Quinlan, 2006, 76).

Each woman, in her own way, took the experience of participating in an interview with me as an opportunity to reflect on her life. The entire research project was dialogical – all of the participants in the study 'asked back', (Qakley, 1981.30, Quinlan, 2006, 67). The women wanted to know why I was recording this, and not recording that, why I deemed this significant and not that. Conversations like this happened all the time 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 evidenced their sense of personal power in relation to the research. The women felt powerful enough to contribute to the research process, in terms of the data that they contributed to the research project and the ways in which data were gathered.

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

My research was shaped by the insights into women's experiences afforded to me by my being in the prison, by my developing feminist consciousness, and my developing feminist criminology and research methodology scholarship. Key concerns that focused my research 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, (Quinlan

2006, 2011). It was and it remains the most comprehensive study of women's experiences of prison in Ireland.

CASE STUDY 2: Lucy's experience of research in and around women's prisons in England

In this case study, I outline some of my experiences in relation to my work with women in the criminal justice system. I undertook my doctoral and other research with criminalised women after a long career in social work, probation work and academia, and there is no doubt that my professional roles and experiences prepared me to some extent for the physical, emotional, and academic demands of the research. My role as a mother, and someone who had shared many of the lived experiences of the mothers in my research, also provided additional understanding, tools, motivation and empathy; and these, in turn, informed my ethical care and methodological decisions which were deeply rooted in feminist thinking and methodology. Whilst 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 and Purvis, 1994:2). 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 loyally feminist methodology, and thereby acknowledged the long standing deeply structural, cultural and multi layered position and disadvantage, which is the lived 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 the products of research. It was important to me and my feminist principles that this was not the case in my research. The

mothers and their voices are centred in my doctoral thesis, and some of the mothers will be/have been involved in its dissemination and in publications emanating from the study.

At the outset of my study, I had some reservations about speaking to women about their motherhood whilst they were incarcerated -and arguably in a powerless and vulnerable position. Given that 46% of the female prison population in England have previously attempted suicide (Prison Reform Trust 2016) I was mindful 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 mindful that this unease was to an extent based on my own social and personal constructions of mothering and motherhood. I was aware that there were many variables that might be out of my own or the mothers control if the one-to-one research interviews took place in prison (for example an immediate lock up – which might mean an abrupt and uncompassionate ending to an interview at an inappropriate and emotional point). Further, I was mindful that although mothers 'might' have access to support in prison – they were less likely to have access to 'comfort' (discussed in more detail in my thesis) 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 who mother and mother well in and through the most challenging of circumstances, and especially criminalised women (Booth and Harriott 2021, Baldwin 2021b). Women and mothers are resilient and do, as highlighted by Corston (2007), continue to mother and run 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) with mothers, one in the community, with post-release mothers, and one in a prison, with mothers I was already working with on a voluntary basis. The 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 research consultation sessions facilitated the input, agency, and voice of the women participants, and this is so important 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 post-release only. While that is the case, the RCS members suggested that 'in prison' mothers were likely to still want to contribute to the study and that it was important they 'had a voice'. The RCS members felt that 'writing letters' might be more appropriate, 'as the mothers 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 as and when it became too emotional). Thus, this avenue of data collection was included in the study. Many of the mothers in the study asked for their 'real' names to be used, this was not possible on this occasion because of my ethical approval (which clearly stated data would be anonymised). However, the mothers chose their own pseudonyms which helped them retain ownership of their 'stories'. It is worthy of note that other feminist researchers (Lockwood 2013, Grinyer 2002), interestingly

in a similar field, (i.e. research with criminalised and traditionally 'voiceless' women), have described facing a similar issue and have called for this to be considered in future research and ethical applications.

As a working class woman with a traumatic past who had been a teenage single mum and had lived in poverty, I was very aware that I shared many of the characteristics and experiences of some of the mothers in my research. These shared characteristics alongside the fact I was a mother and grandmother informed my research relationships. Relationships that I genuinely feel contributed heavily to the deeply emotive findings in my study. The mothers were comfortable with me as I was with the mothers, 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, 1981:41). However, in feminist research, and especially where central characteristics and experiences are shared, reflexivity becomes even more important (Cooper and Rogers 2015), and I employed what I termed a 'rolling reflexivity' (Baldwin 2021b; 135) throughout my study, and this, importantly, is visible in my thesis.

Burgess-Proctor (2014) 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 my participant mothers did not end with the interview. Where and when instigated by the mothers, relationships continued, and as a result I have supported several mothers in seeking accommodation, support, employment and opportunities. Further in-keeping with feminist and matricentric principles of involvement, agency and empowerment, I have co-produced

academic writing with two mothers, co-presented findings, and will be writing with other mothers from the study in the future.

Mothers in the study described taking part as 'positive', 'cathartic' experience where they described feeling 'listened' to and 'heard' sometimes 'for the first time'. All of the mothers were happy to know my activism and challenge ran alongside and beyond the end of the study (and continues), mothers described how including their voices and experiences made them feel part of that activism and drive for change and I continue to campaign alongside some of the mothers from my study. In all research it is important that the processes of research 'do no harm' to participants (Moore and Wahidin 2018, Abbott et al 2019), and as far as is possible to know I left all of the mothers in as positive of frame of mind as possible. I was able to exit the research 'ethically and with care' (Baldwin 2021b, 101).

In my studies I have found at times there has been some resistance to the activism, reflexivity and sometimes 'messy boundaries' of my feminist research. This can lead to a feminist methodology being misunderstood, undervalued and underestimated (Oakley 2018). It is essential therefore that supervision teams and ethics committees are aware and informed about feminist research and feminist research methodologies so as to ensure the best outcomes possible, both for participants and for feminist researchers.

CASE STUDY 3: Natalie's experience as a novice researching women's experiences in prison in England

In this case study I outline my experience of conducting prison research as a novice while undertaking my PhD (Booth, 2017; 2020). I conducted interviews with imprisoned mothers and caregivers (family members and friends) for children whose mothers were incarcerated. My research interest with maternal imprisonment stemmed from my yearlong placement as a Research Trainee (RT) at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). My contribution to a report on 'Prisoners' childhoods and family backgrounds' (Williams, Papadopoulou and Booth, 2012) indicated the distinct lack of research and policy attention afforded to the area of prisoners' families in England and Wales[i]. More recently, numerous studies have helped bridge a gap by exploring the experiences of maternal imprisonment (including; Baldwin, 2015; Freitas et al., 2016; Masson, 2019; Lockwood, 2020). However, these important contributions were not published when I embarked on my ESRC (Economic and Social Research Committee) funded PhD in 2013 entitled 'Prison and the family; an exploration of maternal imprisonment from a family centred perspective[ii].

When I began the doctoral research, my reading of the literature very quickly indicated the challenges of conducting prison research. Martin (2000:2016) characterised prison as a 'hidden' institution understood only by those who 'live or work there'. King (2000:298) 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[iii] on visits each lasting no more than a day. They were brief prison encounters; providing 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 pause 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 (Olsen, 2005). It is widely acknowledged that during qualitative inquiries the researcher's presence shapes considerations, decisions and interpretations throughout the research process; as 'the product cannot be separated from the means of production' (Letherby, 2003: 6). Reflexive, ethical practices are especially relevant when investigating sensitive issues, such as maternal separation through incarceration.

During the pause of my PhD, I did a 6-month part-time voluntary placement with the Pact Family Worker (FW)[1iv] at HMP Bronzefield women's prison. This placement supported the imprisoned women (/mothers) and their loved ones in the community and my role mirrored the FW's. It involved case work where I would support a woman over a longer period of time, for instance supporting liaisons with social services. I also responded to enquiries from women newly entering 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 and Booth, 2018) who inquired how to organise a visit or attend the visitors centre, answering their questions about rules and processes.

The pause to my PhD might have cost time and money[v], but the ethical gains far outweighed these hurdles. My learning was multifaceted; it was intellectual, emotional, personal, professional, procedural and relational. The advanced insights and interpersonal lessons from that placement were crucial when I resumed the PhD. These were especially useful 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 worry by women on my placement. For instance, in my FW role, discussions with women 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 with the mothers 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 placement was to ensure I had met and spent time with the mothers prior to the research interview. It is widely discussed that rapport is important in qualitative interviewing (Letherby, 2003; Bryman, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2013) 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 mothers to decide not to further participate, while for others, it confirmed their decision to take part. Guided by the placement, I approached data collection in this way because I had learned how trust and openness took time to develop, and that often mothers did not feel comfortable sharing information on the first meeting with a new person. Likewise, 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 project would not have materialised without the knowledge acquired on my placement.

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 whilst 'doing' research with women in prison. I imagine that the limited exposure and lack of familiarity with women in prison 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 prison.

Discussion

In our collective research with criminalised and imprisoned women as outlined above, 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, level of expertise as practitioners, and/or researchers we all committed to a feminist methodology, and we each delivered important work which centred the voices and experiences of the women in our studies. Sadly, discussions between the authors about our own 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. Yet, we can see how and why these harmful and sometimes exploitative practices could be far-reaching and long-term. As such, the authors felt strongly that this paper was needed and is justified.

Women in and around the criminal justice system 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 often assumed to be a hierarchical relationship, and one where the researcher holds all of the 'power'. Ethical care and acknowledgement of power in research is essential if participants are to feel they are being researched *with,* as opposed to only feeling researched *about.* Tangible steps must be taken to actively reduce any power imbalance as far as possible and a significant means of addressing that power imbalance. We propose this can be achieved by moving towards An Ethic of Empathy (see figure 1).

Figure 1: An Ethic of Empathy
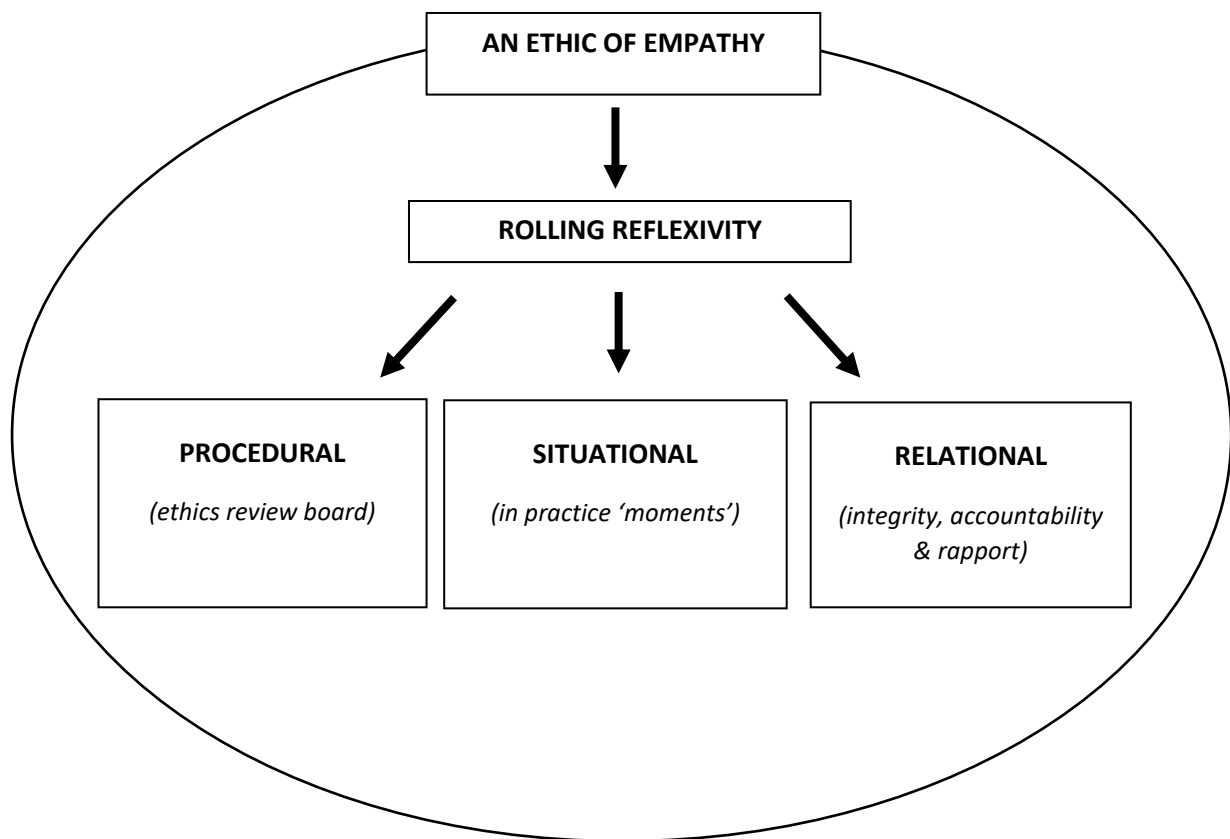
Empathy is often defined as a skillset in which a person can 'put themselves in somebody else's shoes' or 'feel their pain'. Having empathy is important in many professions often linked to working with potentially vulnerable individuals and care work, including roles in medical practice (Ratka, 2018), but we argue it has relevance for researchers too – especially those working with women in criminal justice settings. Social psychology identifies two main types of empathy; cognitive and emotional (Hodges and Myers, 2007). Cognitive empathy generally refers to the 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 in 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 research process. This is especially key in the early phases when planning and applying for

ethical approval, and in considering how the research could be potentially re-traumatising of women participants in criminological research, (not least re-traumatisation based on powerlessness). As demonstrated in the above case studies, all three of us made research decisions by 'putting ourselves in the shoes of the women' and questioning 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 – Christina through befriending, Lucy from shared lived experiences and professional work, and Natalie following her placement – which guided ethical research decision-making. Further, this familiarity provided opportunities for emotional empathy and, as such, the ethical steps in the research process (procedural, situational, and relational[2]) involved continually questioning, considering and understanding of the way in which particular approach might be experienced by women. Enveloped within An Ethic of Empathy, our empathetic practices led to better ensure the placing of women's needs at the centre 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: 205) put to the research community. Booth and Harriott are women now in leadership roles in the criminal justice sector, but who also have experienced incarceration and who describe negative and positive experiences of being research participants. In their writing, they asked for researchers to actively, and further, consider the way in which women participants are involved and integrated into the research process 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 adopting our model, An Ethic of Empathy, we suggest that language is an important reflexive and ethical component. Mindfulness must be paid to the use of terms that can result in the 'othering' of whole groups and this is important from the earliest stages in the research (Oakley, 1981), including procedural ethics. We also strongly feel that integrity and rapport, should be

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[2] See Ellis (2007) for more information about the different stages of ethics in research. Also relevant here is the work of Guillemin and Gillam (2004).

central to research with women affected by the criminal justice system. We appreciate that if this is not cultivated during 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 taking part. Again, this logic follows some of the issues highlighted by Booth and Harriot (2021:209 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 women in prison – 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: 180). Baldwin further states that the empathy and reaction of the researcher is of vital importance, because the re telling of traumatic lived experiences, 'however sensitively handled' will 'leave participants at the least with resurfaced feelings and potentially difficult emotions that they must quash after the interview' (*ibid*). Baldwin (2021a; 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 that might impact on research relationships, and indeed on the research and research outcomes. Maxey (1999:203) 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 all encountered 'bumps in the road' in our own research journeys' whether that be around our own learning and reflexivity, or in the challenge of undertaking the complex task of sensitively and actively facilitating the voices of imprisoned. Our experience tells us that it is not just about providing a platform for women to speak about their trauma, but for 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 not only for the welfare and truth of our participants, but also for the potential impact of participants being involved in the research process. Our case studies demonstrate our own reflexive journeys and how these interacted with our research. 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 all engaged in a meaningful way with the women in our research, sometimes forming lasting and co-productive relationships. We believe this is possible for all research with women in contact with criminal justice systems and trust that our proposal model of 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 been, and often continue to be, shaping their lives. While it is important that work in this area appreciates the resilience and hetergeniety of women, we also believe that the complexity of ethics in research with women in contact with criminal justice systems necessitates a particular ethical preparation and one which is informed by feminist principles. As such, this article has proposed a new model to guide those conducting research with women in contact with criminal justice systems, which we have conceptualised as an Ethic of Empathy. All three authors have researched the experiences of criminalised women and mothers, and observed how the feminist ethical principles that we had woven into our own projects were not always at the forefront of the minds of other researchers in the field. Consequently, we felt compelled to share our reflections and experiences, through a case study methodology, not only to provide transparency and examples of our own 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 contact with the criminal justice system 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 the research process, and especially in the different ways in which ethical principles are instilled; procedurally, situationally, and relationally. It is our intention that this model might 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 field. It is also our hope that by creating and sharing an Ethic of Empathy model we might prompt further critical discussions and engagement with research ethics with women in criminal justice systems.

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[i] Prisons in England hold women from England and Wales as there are no female prisons in Wales.
[ii] Family-centred places families and relationships at the heart of the study.
[iii] Natalie visited four male prison establishments, and one women's prison all located in England between 2011 and 2013 during my time as a RT at the MoJ, and whilst studying for my Masters in Research degree.
[iv] For more information about the role of FWs see Dominey et al (2016).
[v] My ESRC stipend was suspended during my placement and so I had to work extra jobs to pay for this deficit.