Not Seen and Not Heard: Ethical Considerations of Research with Children of Prisoners

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The ethical complexities associated with research with children are well recognised and have been debated extensively within the childhood literature. However, ethical issues occurring in research with children about sensitive issues, such as parental incarceration, and the practical solutions required to address such issues, are less well described. This paper draws on recent experiences of a research project conducted in the Australian Capital Territory exploring the needs of children of prisoners. It discusses three key interrelated methodological and ethical challenges observed by the researchers. While there is no doubt that considerable care needs to be taken to identify ethical and effective ways to undertake research with this group of children, we argue that applying a process of ethical reflexivity will assist researchers in planning and conducting ethical and methodologically valid research with children of prisoners.

I INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades there has been a considerable shift in understandings about children and childhood. The importance of children's participation, their opinions and perspectives are now seen to be essential in the development of both social policy and service delivery. Current understandings of childhood highlight that children often have different views from adults and that understanding and incorporating these is critical if we are to respond effectively.¹ Current understandings also emphasise the need for children to be provided with opportunities to participate in dialogue and to have their views heard.² However, Masson³ makes the point that researchers cannot simply focus on children who are readily accessible or who are articulate. Children's views are particular to the childhood they experience and researchers need to ensure that they include children from a range of backgrounds.⁴ Therefore, facilitating

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- 1 Ann Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, 'Children's Participation in Research: Some possibilities and Constraints in the Current Australian Research Environment' (2010) 2(46) *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 133.
  - 2 Nigel Thomas and Claire O'Kane, 'The Ethics of Participatory Research with Children' (1998) 12(5) *Children & Society* 336.
  - 3 Judith Masson, 'The Legal Context' in S Fraser, V Lewis, S Ding et al (eds), *Doing Research with Children and Young People* (Sage Publications, 2004).
  - 4 Ibid.

meaningful participation of children who are hard to reach, and talking with them about their lives requires particular attention to ethical and practical challenges.

Many of the ethical and methodological challenges associated with research involving children are well recognised and have been debated extensively within the literature.⁵ While a number of these challenges are common to research with all children, many of them are more problematic and some are even unique to research with children whose social positioning renders them particularly vulnerable.⁶ As more and more children experience social and emotional challenges to their wellbeing it is likely that social researchers will increasingly be required to conduct research with children about these difficulties or sensitive issues (eg child abuse, homelessness, domestic violence).⁷ While there is more literature regarding the ethical and methodological challenges experienced by researchers when engaging children generally, this lacks any real analysis or discussion of how such challenges relate to, or may be addressed for, children about sensitive issues.

This article focuses on the interrelated ethical and methodological issues that occur when research with children interfaces with research on sensitive topics. Drawing on a recent study conducted in the Australian Capital Territory,⁸ which explored with children their experiences of parental incarceration, this article describes three key barriers to engaging children observed by researchers over the course of the research: the invisible nature of children of prisoners; the role of gate keepers; and the need for children to be protected. While there is no doubt that considerable care needs to be taken to identify ethical and effective ways to undertake research with this group of children, we also make the argument that through applying a process of reflexivity, researchers will be in a better position to respond to both ethical and methodological issues as they arise throughout the research process.

II INVOLVING CHILDREN IN SENSITIVE RESEARCH

Until recently, the parenting status of Australian prisoners has been poorly considered. However, Australian and international criminological policy and research is now more focused on the role that families play in the wellbeing, re-offending and rehabilitation of prisoners.⁹ This growing

5 Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow, *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People* (Sage Publications, 2011).

6 Pranee Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (Sage Publications, 2006).

7 Ibid.

8 The Australian Capital Territory is the capital of Australia with a population of 350,000 people.

9 Nancy G La Vigne, Rebecca L Nasser, Lisa E Brooks and Jennifer L Castro, 'Examining the Effect of Incarceration and In-prison Family Contact on Prisoners' Family Relationships (2005) 21 *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 316.

body of research has considered family connectedness from a variety of perspectives and the emerging evidence of its positive impact on mental wellbeing, and social, health, and criminological outcomes for prisoners.¹⁰ There is also growing interest in the reciprocal impacts of imprisonment on families, and particularly on children.¹¹ It has been recognised that prisoners need to be seen in the context of their family and parenting identities if a range of preventative, restorative and rehabilitative imperatives are to be fully achieved for the prisoner and for their children.¹²

Current research has found that children whose parents are imprisoned are likely to be affected by higher levels of disadvantage than their peers; for example, they are more likely to experience multiple and complex health, social and welfare problems, including poverty, family violence, substance abuse and mental health issues.¹³ While a growing body of international research has described the characteristics of children of prisoners, what is known about these children has been gleaned largely from research conducted with adult professionals, or from the parent or care-giver perspective.¹⁴ While this research is important, there have been very limited efforts to include children themselves in research.

The value of engaging children directly in research about their lived experiences has been recognised only recently. Historically, research with children has been dominated by methodologies that focus 'on' children

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- 10 Oliver Robertson, 'The Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children', Women in Prison and Children of Imprisoned Mothers Series. (Quaker United Nations Office, 2007); Emma Stanley and Stuart Byrne, 'Mothers in Prison: Coping with Separation from Children' (2000) Paper presented at the Women in Corrections: Staff and clients' conference, Adelaide 31 October - 1 November 2000; Jeremy Travis, Elizabeth McBride, Amy Solomon, 'Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Re-entry' (Justice Policy Centre, Urban Institute, 2003).
  - 11 Julie Poehlmann, Danielle Dallaire, Ann Booker Loper and Leslie D Shear 'Children's Contact with their Incarcerated Parents. Research Findings and Recommendations (2010) 65(6) *American Psychologist* 575.
  - 12 Ibid.
  - 13 J Mark Eddy and John B Reid, 'The Adolescent Children of Incarcerated Parents' in J Travis and M Waul (eds), *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Re-entry on Children, Families, and Communities* (Urban Institute, 2003) 233-258.
  - 14 B Bloom and D Steinhart, *Why Punish the Children? A Reappraisal of the Children of Incarcerated Mothers in America* (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1993); Venezia Marlene Kingi, 'The Children of Women in Prison' [PhD thesis] (Victoria University of Wellington, 1999); Brenda McGowan and Karen Blumenthal, 'Why Punish the Children? A Study of the Children of Women Prisoners' (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1978); J Tomaino, S Ryan, S Markotic and J Gladwell, *Children of Prisoners Project: Steering Committee's Report to the Justice Cabinet Committee* (Justice Strategy Division, Attorney General's Department, 2005); Nola Tudball, *Doing it Hard. A Study of the Needs of Children and Families of Prisoners in Victoria* (VACRO, 2000); Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO); *Children: Unintended Victims of Legal Process – A Review of Policies and Legislation Affecting Children with Incarcerated Parents* (Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, 2006).

(where adult conduits spoke about and on behalf of children in the research space), and which were framed by discourses of vulnerability and incompetence.¹⁵ Over the past 20 years there has been an increasing quantum of work that promotes children's agency and conceptualises them as able and competent research participants with views different to adults.¹⁶ This position has been framed in part by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which asserts that children have 'the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them'.¹⁷ At the same time, the 'New Sociology of Childhood' and 'Childhood Studies', have influenced how children are constructed as social actors who can shape their own lives and can also influence others. These approaches identify how children have distinct capacities to understand and explain their lives. It has also been recognised that children conceptualise and experience the world differently to adults and have distinctly different experiences and concerns. It is only by engaging children directly in research that a more complete picture of their life worlds is possible. These theoretical arguments have led to the increased participation of children in research, including their more active participation in the design and implementation of research.¹⁸

Nevertheless, while there has been a shift in how children are constructed, which has led to their increased involvement in research, there are still many areas of social experience that are often regarded as too sensitive to explore with children, or which are even taboo, such as research exploring sexual abuse, violence, drug use or homelessness.¹⁹ Concerns about the sensitive nature of these life experiences have meant that these groups of children have traditionally been excluded from participation in studies exploring these issues. For many researchers, this is motivated by a view that childhood is marked by vulnerability, in that children may be seen as 'lacking the ability to make personal life choices, personal decisions, maintain independence and self-determine'.²⁰ In the research context, this has meant that in an attempt to protect children, adults have been wary of allowing children to participate in research, due to a perception that children may not be in a position to act in their own best interests and to opt out of studies if they cause discomfort or concern.

Punch²¹ states that children are marginalised in an adult-dominated society due to the unequal power relations with adults and are therefore seen as being particularly at risk of exploitation and abuse by adults. It is also evident that for some groups of children, their life circumstances

15 Allison James and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Teachers College Press, 1998).

16 Allison James and Pia Christensen, *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (Routledge, 2008).

17 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Geneva, 1989).

18 Mary Kellett, *Rethinking Children and Research* (Continuum, 2010).

19 Liamputtong, above n 6.

20 Linda Weaver Moore and Margaret Miller, 'Initiating Research with Doubly Vulnerable Populations' (1999) 30(5) *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 1034-1040.

21 Samantha Punch, 'Research with Children: The Same or Different from Research with Adults?' (2002) 9 *Childhood* 325.

and social positioning further marginalise and disadvantage them, hence making them 'doubly vulnerable'.²²

Subsequently, it is argued that these children's participation in research may potentially pose more emotional and social threats, and further vulnerability.²³ This means that the obligations and responsibilities that researchers have towards participants may be different, which becomes even more pronounced when a child is identified as already 'damaged by their experiences'.²⁴ However, we contend that researchers can act in ways that respond to these vulnerabilities and enable children to participate. Researchers have a responsibility to protect research participants from harm no matter their age, capacity or experience. By ensuring that research is child-centred, responds to the unique needs of particular groups of children, and that potential risks and harms are balanced with benefits to children as a group and as individuals, we (and others) argue that children's participation in research on sensitive issues can be conducted ethically and appropriately.²⁵ Further, researchers contend that by excluding children from research on sensitive issues, and by not directly talking about these topics, the research community may be acting unethically, as children's voices are silenced and they remain in a powerless position.²⁶

Being a child who has a parent in prison is clearly in this category of social research. Few authors have commented on their reasons for excluding children of prisoners from their research. Three international studies highlight the ethical concerns involved in such research, such as the notion of raising traumatic events, or the risk of exploitation due to the research methods utilised.²⁷ Others highlighted a lack of specialised resources and skills required to conduct research with children.²⁸

Planning and conducting any research with vulnerable groups of children and young people raises dilemmas and tensions that are common to most research with children. There are, however, specific issues that are particular to research with children who experience parental incarceration. For these reasons it is argued that children require particular safeguards to protect them from harm, and that the obligations and

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22 Liamputtong, above n 6.

23 Claire Renzetti and Raymond Lee, *Researching Sensitive Topics* (Sage Publications, 1993).

24 Liamputtong, above n 6.

25 James and Prout, above n 15.

26 Tim Moore, et al, 'Championing Choice – Lessons Learned from Children and Young People About Research and their Involvement', (2011) 4 Child Indicators Research.

27 Fakir Al Gharaibeh, 'The Effects Upon Children in Jordan of the Imprisonment of their Fathers. A Social Work Perspective' (2008) 51(2) *International Social Work* 233-246; Sarah Lewis Selina Bates and Joseph Murray, *Children of Prisoners – Maintaining Family Ties*. (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2008); above n 13.

28 Eddy and Reid, above n 13.

responsibilities that researchers have towards participants are different.²⁹ Within Australia, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)³⁰ highlights that research involving children and young people raises ethical concerns that are different to those of other vulnerable groups. Ethical issues relating to research with children discussed in the literature focus on capacity to consent, power imbalances, confidentiality, beneficence and non-maleficence.³¹ It is not possible in this article to fully address the debates concerning each of these issues, however, researchers emphasise that ethical research with children is more than a 'to-do list' or a codified set of principles.³² Ethical considerations when researching with children are of an ongoing nature. Researchers need to be aware of possible ethical issues that may arise throughout the entire research process through ongoing questioning, acting and reflecting.³³

The process of questioning, acting and reflecting provides researchers with a process through which they can challenge what they know and how they know it. According to Berger,³⁴ the process of reflexivity is:

commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researchers' positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.

Furthermore, it is argued that reflexivity is a way of developing an awareness of self-knowledge, of observing the self and the impact of one's own prejudices, beliefs and personal experiences and an understanding of how these influence the development of new knowledge.³⁵ In order to recognise and respond to the ethical and methodological challenges and issues in this project, researchers engaged in ongoing internal dialogue and critical self-reflection, through which the researcher's positionality was made

29 Jo Aldridge, 'Working with Vulnerable Groups in Social Research: Dilemmas by Default and Design' (2014) 14 *Qualitative Research* 112-130.

30 National Health and Medical Research Council, *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007).

31 Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow, *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People* (Barnardos, 2nd ed, 2004); M Hill, 'Children's Voices on Ways of Having a Voice: Children's and Young People's Perspectives on Methods Used in Research and Consultation' (2006) 13 *Childhood*.

32 Sandy Fraser, Vicki Lewis, Sharon Ding et al (eds), *Doing Research with Children and Young People* (Sage Publications, 2004).

33 Michael Gallagher, 'Ethics' in EKM Tisdall, JM Davis and M Gallagher (eds), *Researching with Children and Young People. Research Design, Methods and Analysis* (Sage Publications, 2009) 11-28; Tim Moore, 'Keeping them in Mind: A Reflexive Study that Considers the Practice of Social Research with Children in Australia' (2013) Australian Catholic University.

34 Roni Berger, 'Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research' (2013) *Qualitative Research* 2.

35 Heather D'cruz, Phillip Gillingham and Sebastian Melendez 'Reflexivity, its Meanings and Relevance for Social Work: A Critical Review of the Literature' (2007) 37 *British Journal of Social Work* 73-90.

explicit and accounted for.³⁶ The remainder of this article discusses a recent study conducted with children whose parents are incarcerated to highlight specific ethical and methodological issues and how researchers managed the complex and sensitive context. We make our observations based on our own reflexive observations and from feedback we have received directly from children and carers.

III CHILDREN OF PRISONERS: THE STUDY CONTEXT

The study described in this article received ethics approval from Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee and permission from the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC).³⁷ It was conducted in 2012 within the ACT in partnership with a non-government organisation, SHINE for Kids. SHINE for Kids provides a range of support services to children of prisoners across New South Wales and Victoria which aim to support and strengthen the lives of children and families of prisoners. With the commissioning of a new prison in the ACT in 2009, SHINE for Kids wanted to establish appropriate and meaningful services to support children and young people who experience parental incarceration in the ACT, similar to their Victorian and NSW sites. The aim of the study, therefore, was to develop an understanding of the needs and experiences of children with a parent in prison in the ACT in order to assist SHINE for Kids to develop and implement appropriate supports for children and young people. SHINE for Kids obtained funding from the ACT Health Directorate under the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program to commission this study.

A *Research Approach*

The study was informed by a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is primarily concerned with the study of experience and aims to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation.³⁸

In line with our commitment to participatory research approaches, a Young People's Reference Group (YPRG) consisting of five young people aged between 13-16 years was established. Recruitment of the young people was possible with the help of a youth worker. The YPRG advised researchers on a range of issues, including the language to use in regard to parental incarceration, sensitive issues for researchers to be aware of, and potential interview tools. The YPRG also provided feedback on ways to ensure that all young people who participated would feel adequately

36 Mats Alvesson and Kat Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 2nd ed, 2010).

37 Commissioned in 2009, the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) is a prison and remand centre complex located in the ACT.

38 Stan Lester, 'An Introduction to Phenomenological Research' (Stan Lester Developments, 1999).

supported and safe throughout the interview, and in a manner that was appropriate to them.

The qualitative methods employed in this study included semi-structured interviews informed by a focused literature review, and were developed in consultation with the YPRG and a Project Reference Group. The sample size of this study included fifteen children and young people aged eight to eighteen years who have or have had a parent incarcerated in the ACT, and twelve interviews with parents or caregivers (eg grandparents).

B Recruitment

It is acknowledged that facilitation by service professionals who are known to clients is a useful strategy for recruiting participants into research as it helps to establish contact and trust between researchers and participants.³⁹ Currently, the only specific program working with children and young people who have parents incarcerated in the ACT is SHINE for Kids. However, this service had only recently been established at the commencement of the research project, which meant that they too were in the process of identifying children and families to work with, and did not have a readily available 'sample' for the research team to access.

Subsequently, the study was advertised widely across the ACT and the project information was circulated using a range of strategies. Whilst this method of recruitment was partially successful, recruiting the required sample of 20 participants remained problematic, owing to the fact that many services in Canberra either did not consider they had 'children and young people like this' within their programs, or felt that the children and young people within their programs were 'too vulnerable' to participate in an interview. Where possible, we met with these services to discuss the benefit of our study and to provide them with information and assurances that our approach was ethical and appropriate.

IV RESPONDING TO ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Access to research participants can be one of the most difficult stages of research with children.⁴⁰ We observed through interactions with ethics committees, institutions, organisations and families that three inter-related ethical and methodological issues made access and recruitment particularly problematic for this project: the social visibility of the issue being researched, the role of gatekeepers, and concerns about protecting children.

39 Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow, *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People* (Barnardos, 2nd ed, 2004).

40 Priscilla Alderson, 'Ethical Issues' in S Fraser, V Lewis, S Ding, M Kellet and C Robinson (eds) *Doing Research with Children and Young People* (Sage Publications, 2004).

A *The Invisible Nature of Children of Prisoners*

The social visibility of the research problem is often a significant methodological challenge for researchers to address, and must be confronted in order for the research to be successful. Many research populations have high visibility, such as school children or children with disabilities. While it may not always be easy to access them, it is clear where they are located. Other groups, because of sensitivities surrounding behaviour, moral or legal issues, have very low visibility and subsequently present some critical problems for locating and contacting potential participants.

Until very recently, children of prisoners in the ACT have been a largely unrecognised group at both a research, policy and practice level. Currently there is only one specialist service (SHINE for Kids) within the ACT that specifically works with children of prisoners. However, they only work with children who visit the prison, and based on the numbers of children who have a parent in prison, as identified in the 2010 ACT Health Survey; this is only a small proportion of children of prisoners being supported. Consequently, obtaining a group of participants for this study relied on the goodwill and knowledge of other local organisations, adult programs associated with the prison, youth workers, child protection services and community agencies who work with disadvantaged clients. However, relying on the willingness and capacity of professionals to recruit participants also created a number of challenges.

Due to the single focus design of many services, organisations rarely see the 'full spectrum' of children of prisoners. For example, not all children and young people have contact with their detained parents, so recruiting from the only prison program for children meant that those who did not have contact, or those who only have infrequent or sporadic contact with their detained parent were potentially excluded from participating. Furthermore, many marginalised groups do not use or have access to mainstream services, and so by default were not included in the recruitment process.⁴¹

Additionally, not all children are aware of their parent's incarceration. When asking detainees for permission to interview their children it became apparent that some parents had not told their child that they were incarcerated and did not want their child to know that they were currently in prison. One family member described the great lengths they had gone to prevent the children from finding out. This was particularly evident in families with younger children. Some carers with younger children reported that they would avoid telling them the truth:

We used to say daddy was fishing and mummy was at work, and they accepted that. (Clare, Grandparent)⁴²

41 Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, *Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies* (Social Research Update Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, 2001).

42 All children and caregivers have been provided with a pseudonym.

This isn't just his sentence – it's my sentence too. I do not want my kids knowing and being affected by this. (Sarah, Parent)

Likewise, professionals working with children and young people do not always know that their client has a parent in prison. Services and workers do not, as a matter of course, ask children and young people if they have experienced a parent in prison. Much of the time it is left for children to provide this information to workers. Parental incarceration has been highlighted as a potentially stigmatising and shameful experience for children and young people.⁴³ Research from the United States highlights that children frequently articulate experiences of stigmatisation as well as experiences of bullying and shaming; most frequently from peers but also from teachers and neighbours.⁴⁴ Similar experiences were discussed by the children and young people in this study, and as a consequence of this, many children and young people preferred to keep the knowledge of their parents' incarceration a secret. The withholding of such information further contributed to the invisibility of their experiences and in turn made it more challenging for researchers to locate them.

Conversations with workers also highlighted that there were often unspoken assumptions held by workers about what children of prisoners would 'look like' and how they would be known to the service. Even though services did not collect data on children and parental incarceration, they frequently stated when asked to assist with recruitment that they did not have children 'like that' using their services. Although we did not explore what was meant by this statement, it was evident in interviews conducted with children and young people that a number of the workers who children had approached for support also held particular views about what it meant to be a child of a prisoner:

He was kind of shocked, yeah kind of like gobsmailed, didn't really know what to say so ... He just started telling me stories of these children in the drug world and yeah I was just like, 'is that how you see me, is that like what you're visualising me as?' I didn't really know how to take it so yeah, it was just awkward, very awkward. (Jessie, Young person)

To make the invisible more visible, researchers worked with stakeholders, services and institutions (eg attended staff and network meetings) to raise their awareness that children who experienced parental incarceration may be accessing their services even if they were not readily identifying themselves as a child of a prisoner to workers. As part of the initial contact between researchers and services, we gently challenged the possible stereotypes that may exist about children of prisoners and asked services to consider how they would know if a child had a parent in prison. Asking workers to think about their experiences and to question their ways of knowing enabled them to be more open in asking children and families to be involved in the research project. Furthermore, engaging workers who

43 Gwyneth Boswell, 'Imprisoned Fathers: The Children's View' (2002) (41) *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*.

44 Ande Nesmith and Ebony Ruhland, 'Caregivers of Children with Incarcerated Parents' (2011) 4 *The Open Family Studies Journal*, 105-116.

were asked to recruit research participants to participate in this process of shared reflexivity enabled a greater awareness of this population group and the issues they potentially face. This also proved to be a successful strategy in the recruitment process in that it increased the number of referrals of potential participants to the research project.

B *Gatekeeping*

In research with children and young people, the issue of negotiating access through 'gatekeepers' is one that has been widely discussed.⁴⁵ Where participants are recruited through organisational settings, such as schools or other services, access has to be negotiated to determine the most effective and ethical way for potential research participants to be approached and invited to take part in an interview. Our experience has been similar to other children's researchers' experiences, in that these 'gatekeepers' often come in the guise of ethics or research committees and the organisations through which children and young people are accessed. However, we also found that family members played a considerable gatekeeping role in and out of the prison. As well as their parents and caregivers, children's siblings also censored their participation.

The first stage of our research project involved gaining the approval of a number of Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC) and research committees⁴⁶ located in the ACT. The University HREC required particular amendments and clarification about how researchers would manage issues such as the disclosure of illegal activity, and the potential emotional distress that they believed children may experience if they participated. This HREC indicated through their questions to researchers that they believed that by discussing the nature of these children's lives with them directly, researchers could cause psychological distress such as depression or feelings of guilt. However with appropriate care and safeguards in place they agreed that children had the right to discuss such issues and granted approval. Unfortunately, the two other ethics/research committees did not approve the research (even for an ethics application to simply request the advertisement of the project in support services located in the ACT). Both decisions indicated there was a significant risk of the research causing harm by further stigmatising the children who participated and thereby increasing their vulnerability.

In addition to ethics/research committee concerns, children and young people were also prevented from participating by other gatekeepers such as parents and workers of organisations. Three young people (aged 13-16 years old) who had seen the project advertised contacted researchers to see if they could participate. However, because the young people were

45 Rachel Balen, Eric Blyth, Helen Calabretto et al, 'Involving Children in Health and Social Research' (2006) 13(1) *Childhood* 29-48.

46 Research committees are established in organisations such as child protection services and education departments that make judgments about the usefulness, strategic benefit or risk of proposals.

reluctant to ask for the parental consent needed in order to participate, they had to be excluded. These young people had been told by their parents that they were not allowed to discuss the issue of incarceration outside of the family home. Young people reported that there were strong beliefs in their family that the parental incarceration had to be kept secret as it was embarrassing and shameful for the family, and could have far-reaching consequences for all family members.

Other young people acted as gatekeepers for their own siblings, reporting to researchers that they believed that their siblings would be uncomfortable talking about their lives and the impact of having a parent in prison. Young people in the YPRG also spoke about some of the difficulties they foresaw in recruiting children for this project.

A. To be honest I can't see our little sisters doing this because my sister would flip and she'd be out the door in a second.

A. Same with [my sister].

Q. Why would that be?

A. Because my sister is very intimidated, really easily and like my dad pretty much disowned my sister the day she was born because she is a lot darker than him and she believes my mum cheated on him.

A. Yeah that's the same as my sister. She doesn't want to have anything to do with Dad because he's been in jail and she's all against that sort of stuff. She wouldn't want to be reminded of it. (Reference Group Participants)

Parents also played a role in stopping their children's participation. While no non-detained parent explicitly refused to allow their child to participate, a small number of parents were unable to be followed up after they had initially provided consent for their child to participate. For practical reasons, parental consent was usually obtained from the non-detained parent as it was easier to speak with parents in the community. However, caseworkers at the prison also asked a number of parent detainees if they would consent to speak to researchers about the project to consider consenting to their children being interviewed. No parent detainee agreed and caseworkers reported that detainees were unlikely to agree to their children participating in research if there was any danger that the research could gain information that could risk their sentence or parole.

Workers were the last group of gatekeepers. While many organisations were enthusiastic about this project, certain workers purposefully chose not to refer or discuss participation in the research with potential participants. These workers believed that children were too vulnerable to participate in the research, or that those children's lives were too busy.

Access to children for this research has required negotiation with multiple layers of gatekeepers at different stages of the research process. In order to gain trust and understanding about the project, we spent considerable amounts of time in attending to and addressing gatekeepers' concerns. Considerable time was taken to build relationships with workers and family members. Indeed we found that once researchers had gained the trust of some key families connected to the prison, other families were more likely to consent to participate.

Clearly all gatekeepers have the power to allow or restrict researchers' access to children when they have concerns about the possible negative impact that research participation may have on children. This is despite research that has indicated that this is a low risk. Research which quantifies such impacts is limited but generally suggests that psychological distress is unusual and short-lived.⁴⁷ A number of studies have shown that children exposed to traumatic life events experience the research process in ways not dissimilar to children without such exposure and rarely reported feeling upset as a result of their participation.⁴⁸

This study found that such gatekeepers exercised considerable influence over whether children and young people are given the opportunity to decide whether to participate in research about their lives. However, silencing these children by constructing them as 'too vulnerable' and unable to cope with their vulnerability could also perpetuate the exclusion of the most marginalised groups from research and denies them their right to articulate their views and concerns.

C Protecting Children

Much of the literature available concerning gatekeepers discusses their roles in either censoring children's right to participate⁴⁹ or ensuring that children are protected from research that could potentially be exploitative, invasive or coercive. Due to the fact that these gatekeepers are also increasingly at risk of consequences (legal, financial, emotional and reputational) for failing to provide children with protection, parents and other adults have becoming increasingly risk-averse and have often chosen to restrict children's participation, and as an unintended consequence, any potential benefits that their participation might allow. Added to this are parents' concerns and fears about allowing their children to discuss such stigmatised matters or issues that expose matters that families wish to remain private. Subsequently, whilst a number of parents identified that the project might benefit the individual child, other individual children, and children as a group; it was evident that many more parents had concerns of varying degrees that prevented them consenting to their children's participation.

The NHMRC highlights that research may lead to harms, discomforts and/or inconveniences for participants and/or others.⁵⁰ Whilst there is not an exhaustive list of harms, the NHMRC classifies harm as being physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal. Gatekeepers in this project were particularly concerned with social and psychological harm

47 David Finkelhor et al, 'Ethical Issues in Surveys About Children's Exposure to Violence and Sexual Abuse' in CA Cuevas and C Rennison (2013), *Wiley Handbook on the Psychology of Violence* (Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2012).

48 Ybarra, ML et al, 'Impact of Asking Sensitive Questions About Violence to Children and Adolescents' (2009) 45(5) *Journal of Adolescent Health* 499-507.

49 I Coyne, 'Research with Children and Young People: The Issue of Parental (Proxy) Consent' (2010) 24(3) *Children & Society* 227-237.

50 Above n 27.

of children participating. Social harm includes damage to social networks or relationships with others; discrimination in access to benefits, services, employment or insurance and social stigmatization.⁵¹ Stigmatisation is often identified as one of the impacts of parental incarceration on children and young people. Stigmatisation has been described as a process which distinguishes and labels differences with negative attributes in order to perpetuate differences in social, cultural, political and economic power.⁵² Research is one process which makes these differences noticeable. Indeed, research can often reinforce ideas about difference. As Phillips and Gates highlight, the term ‘children of incarcerated parents’ has become more than a descriptor, it is now a label that signifies a group of children based ‘upon a stigmatised characteristic shared by their parents’.⁵³ The issue for researchers and ethics committees is to understand and articulate clearly what safeguards need to be in place that protect children and young people from harm, and that do not negatively contribute to ‘further’ stigmatisation, but allows researchers to explore this group of children’s needs and experiences in order to better support them.

D Balancing Safeguarding and Stigmatisation: Strategies Implemented

1 Flexible Methods to Respond to Concerns

As identified earlier, researchers employed a reflexive approach throughout the duration of this research project. Researchers asked critical questions of both themselves and other stakeholders about assumptions held not only about the research questions but also about the possible methodologies available to researchers to fully consider the research question. Such critical reflection was designed and used to understand and minimise risks of the research, particularly for the children and young people who were rendered vulnerable due to their age and also their social positioning. While many of the challenges we experienced we had broadly anticipated and addressed in our research proposal, we still encountered issues, particularly with recruitment, which necessitated adapting the research process.

For this project, the methodology and methods were considered for their appropriateness and safety through a number of ‘controls’. Collaboration between the YPRG and the researchers ensured that questions, tools and activities were sensitive to the issues that children experienced. In this study, both researchers and the YPRG reflected on how the recruitment of participants and the development of the research questions could influence or impact children’s identities and perceptions

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51 Ibid.

52 Bruce G Link and Jo C Phelan, ‘Conceptualizing Stigma’ (2001) 27 *Annual Review of Sociology* 363-385.

53 Susan Phillips and Trevor Gates, ‘A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Stigmatisation of Children of Incarcerated Parents’ (2011) 20 *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 286-294.

of stigmatisation. Questions were designed to elicit information about the impact of parental incarceration and also to understand the child or young person's experience from a holistic perspective, ie seeing them for more than this characteristic of their life. Ethics committees and an 'adult' reference group comprised of experts also provided feedback on the questions and methods.

Discussions also occurred with young people about how they might like to talk about their experiences of parental incarceration. Researchers spoke with the YPRG about activities and tools, and whether face-to-face interviews were more preferable than focus groups or online questionnaires. Young people like the concept of chatting over Facebook and thought that the information provided to researchers may be more truthful.

Well they feel bigger and tougher and they have more confidence in themselves over the internet because they're not face to face. (Reference Group participant)

However, they also recognised that the internet was not always safe, so after much discussion decided that face-to-face interviews would be preferable.

2 Safety Scaffolding

To ensure children and young people's safety, clear parameters were put in place around the sample at the beginning of the research process. This study only engaged children and young people who were fully aware of their parents' circumstances and who had an informed understanding of what parental incarceration meant for them. This was determined by parents and workers who had referred the young person to the study. It was important to not stigmatise children by recruiting them in ways that identified them to others as 'a child of parent who is incarcerated'. This was ensured through the recruitment methods and the way the project was advertised.

Once involved in the research, in line with best practice, children were afforded a safe and secure environment in which to discuss with the researcher their experiences of parental incarceration. Through discussions with the YPRG, researchers were aware of the types of venues and places that were acceptable for children and young people to be interviewed in, and how children and young people travelled there. For many children and young people, school was identified as one of the most convenient and safest places. However this was not possible, as approval had been declined by the Education Directorate, and subsequently, researchers were not authorised to speak to children in the public school environment. This meant a number of children and young people were excluded from the research as alternative venues were not readily available. For a small scale qualitative study this was problematic in that it affected the sample size and our opportunity to speak to children in an environment that they considered familiar and safe.

At the completion of the research process, researchers also have a responsibility to ensure that children have the opportunity to debrief. Researchers regularly 'checked in' with children throughout the interview and at the end of the interview asked them to choose a facial expression carved into a rock, which represented how they felt. All children and young people identified that the interview had been a positive experience, although for some it was clearly an emotional experience:

Well I'm kind of tired so I'm going to pick that one too but I was happy to do it and I like this rock. (Shelley, young person)

At the end of the interview, children and young people were offered access to further support. The support offered included referrals to other services. Before the commencement of the interviews, the YPRG alerted us to the possible issues that might arise and cause distress for participants. They also identified possible avenues of support that existed, should participants become distressed, such as the school counsellor or Kids Helpline. Subsequently, researchers were prepared with relevant and current information about the possible avenues of support for children and young people. Only one young person, after hearing about the study, declined to be interviewed because they did not wish to discuss the topic, believing it would distress them. No child or young person who did participate in the interviews became distressed, with all participants describing the experience as useful and worthwhile.

3 Dissemination

Finally, dissemination of findings is a critical component of keeping children and young people safe in the research process, which is not always sufficiently addressed. Much discussion in the literature about research dissemination considers the need for the widest possible dissemination of the research, in the most effective manner, and at the earliest opportunity.⁵⁴ This includes the need to translate research into practice. Researchers and those who commission research are acutely aware of the need to identify the problems or difficulties that particular groups experience in order to obtain funding for programs and support. In constructing research findings about problems or negative issues, researchers run the risk of stigmatising or causing further harm to participants and the population groups they are researching. Consequently, it is important for researchers and their commissioning bodies to be aware of the impact and the unintended consequences of research on participants and the population groups they are researching. Further, reinforcing the belief that children of prisoners are different to other children who experience the loss of a parent or identifying them as a specific group that needs

54 P Cloke, 'Deliver Us From Evil? Prospects for Living Ethically and Acting Politically in Human Geography'. (2002) 26(5), *Progress in Human Geography*, 587-604; Virginia Morrow, 'Ethical Dilemmas in Research with Children and Young People About their Social Environments' (2008) 6 *Children's Geographies* 49.

‘fixing’ has the potential to cause a range of inadvertent challenges for children and young people with such life experiences.

The dissemination of research findings is therefore another opportunity in the research process which may be appropriate for children and young people to participate in. However, there is little evidence in the literature concerning parental incarceration to suggest that children and young people have any involvement in this stage of the research. Researchers are increasingly coming from a perspective framed within the social studies of childhood,⁵⁵ and as a result, recognise the need to work with rather than on children.⁵⁶ The children’s right’s agenda, emerging from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocates children’s involvement in decisions that affect their lives, and this has had implications for the ways in which children are now included in all stages of research.⁵⁷ This has resulted in innovations that seek to empower young people in the research process, including through dissemination of research findings.⁵⁸

For this study, informed by the principles and practices of child-centred research, the researchers asked children and young people from the reference group to check the meaning and emphasis of the interview data, the adult interpretations of what children and young people said, and what children and young people wanted to see included in the final research report. Enthusiastic discussions were held with children about what should be included in the report. Children wanted to be described as aspirational, strong and independent. They wanted the research to highlight the difficulties they suffered without diminishing the successes they also experienced. Agreeing with the themes identified by the researcher, they also wanted the findings to be presented as dynamic so that people could understand the changing, fluid nature of their lives.

Children and young people described to the researcher how they appreciated being involved in this stage of the research. It was also important as children have the right to know the findings and conclusions of the research. If children are to be conceptualised as agents in their own life, they need also to be conceptualised as exerting agency in respect of research,⁵⁹ especially when it concerns the representation of their own views.

55 SL Holloway, and G Valentine, ‘Children’s Geographies and the New Social Studies of Childhood’, in SL Holloway and G Valentine (eds) *Children’s Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning* (Routledge, 2000).

56 Deborah Harcourt and Jonathon Sargeant, ‘The Challenges of Conducting Ethical Research with Children’ (2011) 2(3) *Education Inquiry* 421-436.

57 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Geneva, 1989).

58 Morrow, above n 54, 58.

59 Priscilla Alderson, ‘Research by Children: Rights and Methods’ (2001) 4(2) *International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Theory and Practice* 139-153.

V CONCLUSION

This article has considered the complexities of the issues in research with children and young people who experience parental incarceration. The article does not offer prescriptive methods or try to suggest any formula of how to do research in this area. It does, however, seek to identify and discuss some of the key ethical and methodological issues we have struggled with when engaging children and young people in research about issues concerned with parental incarceration.

Enabling children and young people to actively engage in research allows researchers to develop a greater understanding about their lived experience and a deeper understanding of the challenges and concerns that affect the lives of children and those of their families and communities.⁶⁰ Many issues encountered in this study are similar to those found in other research with children, however, researchers found that research with children and young people experiencing parental incarceration presented additional challenges. The invisible nature and lack of recognition that these children and young people experience from policy-makers and services, paternalistic constructions of risk and vulnerability that discriminates and excludes children and young people from being provided information about participation in research, the secrecy and the stigma attached to children and young people's lives that result in some children and young people not wishing to participate, as well as the need for time to build robust and trusting relationships, all significantly influenced how research is conducted with this population. By taking a reflexive and responsive approach to research, we were able to respond simultaneously to the ethical and methodological issues encountered, thus ensuring the research remained rigorous, ethically sound, and most importantly benefited both participants and their communities.

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60 Allison James and Pia Christensen, *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (2nd ed) (Falmer Press, 2008).