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Sociological stalking? Methods, ethics and power in longitudinal criminological research

Abstract

Scholarship on criminal careers and desistance from crime employing longitudinal methodologies has paid scant attention to sociological and anthropological debates regarding epistemology, reflexivity and researcher positionality. This is surprising in light of a recent phenomenological turn in desistance research wherein (former) lawbreakers' identity, reflexivity, and self-understanding have become central preoccupations. In this article I interrogate aspects of the methodological 'underside' (Gelsthorpe, 2007) of qualitative longitudinal research with criminalised women through an examination of the surveillant position of the researcher. Focusing on methods, ethics and power, I examine some contradictions of feminist concerns to 'give women voice' in research involving re-tracing an over-surveilled and highly stigmatised population. I reflect on the effects of researcher positionality through a conceptualisation of re-tracing methods as, at worst, a form of sociological stalking.

Key words: ethics, power, surveillance, criminalised women, research methods

7276 words

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Criminalised Women, Research and Epistemology:

Methods, Ethics and Silence

Scholarship on criminal careers and desistance from crime – and indeed within life-course criminology more broadly – has paid scant attention to sociological and anthropological debates regarding epistemology, reflexivity and researcher positionality. This is all the more surprising given the recent phenomenological turn in desistance research wherein (former) lawbreakers’ identity, reflexivity, and self-understanding - and also (though less often) their structural positioning - have become central preoccupations (e.g. Giordano et al., 2002; Glynn, 2014; Healy, 2014; King, 2013; Leverentz, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007; Weaver, 2016). The use of longitudinal methods, increasingly common in desistance research (Farrall, 2002; Farrall et al., 2014; Halsey & Deegan, 2015; Leverentz, 2014; Giordano, 2010; Giordano et al., 2002; Weaver, 2016) presents particular ethical dilemmas, perhaps most notably a heightened concern with the surveillant position of the researcher. However, discussions of the longitudinal research process in the field have tended only to focus on the need for persistence in retracing efforts and on the consequences of losing sample members in terms of selective attrition, biased findings and threats to validity (e.g. Cotter et al., 2005; Farrall et al., 2016; Leibrich, 1994). Accordingly, methodological accounts have documented the relative ‘success’ of different retracing methods, such as traditional approaches (e.g. mail, door knocking) and the use of new technologies (e.g. social networking sites).

Accounts from this consequentialist standpoint (which one might frame in terms of accountability to the academic community) have been somewhat muted on the ethical

ambiguities entailed in re-tracing participants, a central concern in what Walkerdine and colleagues (2002: 182) refer to as the “tricky surveillance of the research endeavour”. The aim of retaining participants’ involvement may at times conflict with maintaining research integrity: there is sometimes a fine line between ‘walking alongside’ (former) lawbreakers in order to gain a deep understanding of how their lives and narratives develop over time, and reproducing everyday modes of scrutiny and surveillance. These concerns are amplified when the research ‘subjects’ are offending women.

Feminist scholars have made explicit the exercise of power in the research process by emphasising the ontological basis of knowledge production: who a researcher is, his/her sex, race, class and sexuality, affects what s/he will ‘find’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Feminist critics of positivist knowledge claims to universal ‘truth’ argued that women’s experience must be central in the production of knowledge about them (Code, 1995; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This feminist ‘standpoint’ perspective (Harding, 1987) has in turn been accused of essentialism: ‘woman’ is not a unified category and women’s experiences vary according to their classed and ethnic/racial structural positioning (Bar-On, 1993; Collins, 1990). Michelle Fine’s argument that qualitative research has often reproduced “a colonizing discourse of the “Other”” (1994: 70) can be levelled at much feminist, as well as ‘mainstream’, scholarship.

In addition to concerns about representation, feminist scholars, mindful of the political dimensions of knowledge production and its potential for exploitation, have emphasised the importance of non-hierarchical power relations, empathy, reciprocity

and authenticity in the research process (Oakley, 1981; and, in criminology, see Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990). The extent to which feminist qualitative methods do indeed disrupt hierarchical power relations (regardless of the class or ethnic positioning of either researchers or informants) has also been subjected to critical examination. Where empathy is not ‘natural’ – perhaps a more likely scenario when the social distance between researcher and informant is greater – self-consciously “doing rapport” and “faking friendship” (Dunscombe & Jessop, 2002) are a distinct possibility, raising searching ethical questions in relation to researcher power and potential danger to participants. More-or-less authentic attempts at empathy, equity and ‘friendship’ may increase participants’ vulnerability to exploitation as ‘sources of data’: they may disclose things about themselves which would perhaps be best kept private (Finch, 1984; Stacey, 1988).

These debates underscore the importance of researcher reflexivity - acknowledgement and scrutiny of the researcher’s own positionality and interrogation of its effects at all stages of the research process - as an important corrective to the “god trick” (Haraway, 1988) of depicting the ‘Other’ from nowhere. A researcher undertaking qualitative interviews and observation is herself the research instrument (Liebling, 2011). Consequently researcher positionality always and inevitably affects interpersonal research encounters and deserves to be taken very seriously (Fine, 1994). However, reflexivity is not without its critics. There is a danger of self-indulgence, of “an infinite, narcissistic regress of self-conscious self-interrogations” (Phillips & Earle, 2010: 372). Worse, Skeggs has argued that the “knowledge and experience of others [can be] used to shore up the composite of the academic reflexive self” (2004: 129).

Code (1995: 23) notes that feminists, having contended that both the production and the dissemination of knowledge are politically invested, insist upon knowers' accountability to their research and everyday communities. Such 'epistemic responsibilities' require us to learn "to see what is systematically and systemically screened from view by the most basic assumptions about how people know the world [...and] to understand the power structures that effect these erasures." It is in this spirit that this article is offered. I interrogate some of the ethical dilemmas involved in qualitative longitudinal research with a heavily 'othered' population - (formerly) criminalised women - paying close attention to the heightened surveillant position of the researcher (Walkerdine et al., 2002) in the process of re-tracing research participants. After introducing the *Precarious Women* study, I discuss ways in which qualitative longitudinal methods may invade participants' privacy and reproduce everyday experiences of stigma, scrutiny and surveillance. Through an examination of the emotional demands for self-reflexivity inherent in the longitudinal narrative interview method, I attempt to make visible aspects of the classed and racialised pains of self-narration which may result in some women's reluctance or refusal to (re-) narrate their lives.

The Study: Precarious Women

The participants in the study were recruited via two Youth Offending Teams and one Secure Training Centre in England when they were subject to youth justice supervision or in penal custody (Sharpe, 2012). During the first wave of the research,

which took place in 2005-6 and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, fifty-two young women aged between 13 and 19 years were interviewed by the author.¹ Thirty-six of these women – 69 per cent of the original cohort - were re-interviewed, again by the author, for the second wave of the study, which took place between 2012 and 2014 with funding from the Leverhulme Trust, when most of the participants were in their early twenties (range = 20-27 years). Six participants were interviewed twice during the second wave. The study thus comprised two waves of interviews with a gap of six to eight years between interviews for participants involved in the second wave. The follow-up study aimed to investigate the trajectories of the women from youth to adulthood in the shadow of a criminal past, focusing on classed, gendered and generational transitions and their impact on (desistance from) crime, identity and stigma, as well as the influence of significant life events such as motherhood against a backdrop of rapid social change and the dismantling of state support for young people.

The study participants occupy a uniquely precarious position: they were first interviewed in 2005-6, at the height of youth criminalisation in England and Wales (see Bateman, 2015) and reached legal maturity, on average, in 2008, at the start of the global recession. They have experienced a historically-specific punitive climate in both youth justice and welfare policy in Britain, the latter characterised by increased conditionality in relation to state financial assistance, restricted access to social housing and a contraction of children's services and funding for childcare. As young adults in their early 20s with histories of law-breaking and often also of the care system, imprisonment, addiction, and family and intimate partner violence, this group

¹ See Sharpe, 2012: 45-6 for a detailed description of the original sample.

was transient and particularly ‘hard to reach’. Masson and colleagues (2013: 27) note that three populations are considered particularly difficult to re-trace: known lawbreakers; those who were children at the point of recruitment into a study; and women. My participants fell into all three of these groups. The study had not been designed as prospective or longitudinal and I had not maintained contact with participants since the first wave of interviews. However, I had retained demographic information including participants’ addresses at the first wave of interviews, when most were living in the parental home, and the last school they attended.

I conducted the first wave of the study as a doctoral student and there was, at that time, no formal ethical review procedure at my University. Research protocols were drawn up between myself and the three agencies through which I recruited participants, and I shared my semi-structured interview schedule with managers before fieldwork began. My background as a qualified youth justice social worker undoubtedly aided my acceptance by agency gatekeepers, although I usually kept quiet about this when interviewing young women, at least until the end of the interview. By the time I was planning the follow-up study, I applied for ethical approval from my (now different) University department using their relatively short standardised proforma. Surprisingly perhaps, approval was quickly granted, with no questions asked and no restrictions to the fieldwork imposed (for example, regarding how many retracing attempts were permitted). I was simply praised by the reviewers on account of the quality of my participant information sheet.

Although the number of women in the second wave of the study was relatively small, the time and effort required to re-trace and re-interview more than two-thirds of the

original sample was substantial. I spent many days searching online and considerably more driving to possible addresses, knocking on doors (sometimes repeatedly, over a period of weeks or months), peering through letterboxes in search of clues that might reveal the occupant's identity, asking directions and lurking on street corners, trying not to arouse suspicion or look like a detective, door-to-door saleswoman or former cellmate.² I posted hand-written letters through the letterboxes of participants' former and likely current addresses (the latter located via the electoral register), carefully worded to explain that *X* was involved in a research project *Y* years ago and that I would very much like to talk to her again. Leaving a note or talking to a relative explaining – in however circumspect a manner - that I would 'like to talk to' or was 'looking for' *X* unsurprisingly raised a few eyebrows. One participant's mother telephoned me angrily after being contacted by her daughter's cousin at whose address I had called earlier that day. She was, I suspected, concerned that I might be a former prisoner or drug dealer in pursuit of her daughter.

The most fruitful re-tracing methods were: via the participant's mother, who was either still living at the same address (n=6) or whom I located on the electoral register via 192.com (n=3); Facebook (n=7); and by searching 192.com for the participant herself (n=5). My role as sole fieldworker during both waves of the research meant that some participants remembered (if only vaguely) meeting me several years earlier. However, many did not. That just one woman disclosed she had checked out my identity online before agreeing to talk to me again probably reveals less about participants' use of technology than about their previous experiences of unsolicited contact with, and scrutiny by, unknown professionals. Like these professionals, I was

² c.f. Leibrich (1994: 617) who, in her account of a follow-up study of convicted men and women, but not one involving repeat interviews, describes being taken for "a debt collector, estate agent, mistress, police informer, birth mother".

equipped with notes from our previous meeting and ‘knowledge’ about participants’ lives, while they knew nothing about me.

Each woman received £20 as a token of appreciation for taking part in the follow-up study (interviews lasted around 90 minutes). I had given participants no financial incentive during the first wave of interviews, since I was a doctoral student with no fieldwork expenses budget. At that time I took participants out for something to eat and drink, although this was partly a function of needing somewhere to talk outside the parental home, where many still lived. Some researchers call for flexibility in payment amounts when recruiting and gaining the co-operation of research participants who are active lawbreakers. For example, Jacques and Wright hypothesise, instrumentally, that the greater the relational distance between the researcher and a prospective participant, the larger the payment required (but the less “plentiful and truthful the data will be” (2008: 32). Whilst falling short of coercion, this approach raises questions about the exercise of power in the research relationship (see also Grant, 2006). None of the women I interviewed attempted to negotiate regarding payment and there was no obvious instance where the offer of a small financial ‘incentive’ persuaded an otherwise reluctant woman to consent to being interviewed a second time around. Indeed, on two occasions I forgot all about the money: the first time I returned, having driven half way home, to deliver the cash; the second, I called to apologise and sent the money in the post later that day. Many participants, particularly those with dependent children, were in dire financial straits and faced urgent needs to pay utility bills, service debts and purchase nappies and other essentials for their children. For example, twenty-four-year-old mother of four Naomi, whom I interviewed twice during the second wave of the study, was heating

her house during my second visit by leaving her oven switched on with its doors open, since her electricity supply had been switched off – she thought, because the council were “onto” her on account of her “rigged electric”.

The very process of retracing and re-interviewing criminalised women over time illuminates their lived experiences of scrutiny and stigma. Participants’ overlapping identities as female (ex-)offenders, ex-prisoners, (too) young mothers, (ex-)addicts and welfare claimants were all markers of a spoiled past (Goffman, 1963), if not a spoiled present. The methods of longitudinal qualitative research risk reproducing the everyday modes of surveillance experienced by them. The broad-ranging (semi-structured) interview questions in the *Precarious Women* study were deliberately intended to avoid reinforcing popular stereotypes about women offenders.

Nonetheless, participants’ accounts highlighted the powerful and enduring influence of a criminal record – and, by implication, an imputed criminal identity - on their already-precarious reputation and status. For many who were lone young and/or expectant working-class mothers, the spectre of external scrutiny and surveillance – from peers and neighbours, as well as professionals - cast a dark shadow over their daily existence, even when they had long left crime behind (Sharpe, 2015). Feelings of shame, lies told to children (for example, spells in prison reconstructed as trips abroad) and, perhaps most anxiety-inducing of all, the ever-present risk of child protection services (re-)entering their lives constituted a weighty emotional burden.

Invasions of Privacy I: Facebook

I located and messaged 31 of the 52 women in the original sample (60%) via Facebook. Nine replied agreeing to meet me, which led to interviews with seven women.³ The fact that personal photographs and Facebook ‘friends’ are in the public arena and accessible by anyone did not preclude feelings of discomfort and prying. I trawled long ‘friend’ lists in an effort to locate participants whose former co-offenders’, associates’ or family members’ names I knew. I felt uneasy occasionally viewing photographs of women performing highly sexualised femininity in pouting, scantily-clad and heavily made-up selfies. There is insufficient space here to review debates about female subjectivity/objectivity and mediated sexism on social networking sites or the considerable fluidity between digitised and offline identities for young people who, unlike me, have grown up in the digital age. The frequency with which insults, but also compliments, are exchanged via Facebook, and its potential as a highly visible vehicle for shaming and ostracising others (in the current study, usually other young women) represents a seismic and often highly gendered shift in the cultural landscape of young people in the twenty-first century. It was telling that more than one of the women I interviewed mentioned friends’ or associates’ Facebook ‘status’ which broadcasted the fact that they were on probation or had recently been released from prison. Such boasting, when engaged in by women, was considered shameful.

In practical terms, the speed and ease of making contact via Facebook was far greater than driving around and knocking on doors. The majority of young people now use Facebook and recent longitudinal research with ‘hard to reach’ youth indicates that Facebook contact attempts elicit a higher response rate than more traditional methods

³ Some messages did not reach participants’ Facebook inboxes, in which case I messaged them again, paying 70p to ensure that messages went directly to inboxes. Others may have thought my message was a scam.

(Masson et al., 2013). A message on social media can be ignored or a response delayed (and perhaps a face recognised from a photograph) and is thus arguably less intrusive than knocking on someone's door requesting an interview. Several of the women I interviewed, having re-located them by other means, received but did not respond to my Facebook message, believing it to be a scam. When I later met them face to face, the message may have increased my credibility or, conversely, made me appear even more like a stalker.

Invasions of Privacy II: (Grand)maternal Disclosures

An unanticipated outcome of my re-tracing efforts was numerous doorstep conversations with participants' mothers (and occasionally other relatives) in the course of visits to the younger women's former and/or possible address(es). A defining feature in the lives of the participants at the first wave of interviews was strained mother-daughter relationships: these were prominent in the narratives and/or professionals' assessments of 33 of the original 52 participants (Sharpe, 2012: 61-3). During their teenage years several young women had identified conflict with their mother as a precipitating factor in their lawbreaking and conceptualised their offending as 'payback' or 'justice', knowing that mothers would be very upset, and maybe also shamed, when the police and youth justice services entered both their lives. For others, the 'offending as justice' relationship was more direct: one quarter of participants in the first wave had offended against their mother, causing criminal damage to the family home, stealing from mum or assaulting her.

Unsurprisingly, mother-daughter relationships had often changed by the time of the follow-up study and many participants' mothers eagerly recounted various developments (usually, but not always, positive) in their daughters' lives, and improvements in their relationship with each other. Stories of daughters growing up and 'calming down' contrasted with the younger women's accounts of turbulence and conflict some seven years earlier. Few participants had moved far from where they grew up.⁴ No-one had attended university or travelled away to undertake vocational training. Many, however, had become pregnant while very young, which may have galvanised their mothers to put past grievances to one side and help their daughters for the sake of the unborn child. Keeping 'close' geographically is an important trope in working-class subjectivity (Walkerdine et al., 2001, ch.8; Lucey et al., 2003: 282), and being nearby to provide practical, material and emotional support to daughters and grandchildren – and occasionally caring for grandchildren while their mother was in prison – no doubt played an important role in the strengthening of maternal and grandmaternal bonds.

A handful of my re-tracing encounters with participants' mothers were extremely sad, and as a mother I identified with their maternal distress. Kate, whom I had first interviewed when she was 19, explained that she had become addicted to heroin five years earlier, that she did not like her mum's boyfriend and having no choice about moving in with him, and that these events eventually led to her becoming 'estranged' from her family. Despite a dramatic improvement in Kate's relationship with her mother following the birth of her first child and her stabilisation on methadone when she was nineteen, Kate reported that until recently neither her mother nor her sister

⁴ Several women had moved away to escape a drug-using environment, though few had moved more than 20 miles and many of these had subsequently returned to their home town.

had spoken to her for two years. Eight years later, in the course of trying to re-trace Kate, now the non-domiciliary mother of three young children, I contacted her mother. She was helpful in terms of my relocation efforts but also very upset and sounded quite desperate. She explained that Kate was serving a 21-day prison sentence, of which there had been several in recent months, and feared she had been evicted from the hostel where she was living prior to being incarcerated. Kate's mother became very tearful, searching for clues as to why Kate had turned out the way she had, since her other two daughters "have husbands" and "live normal lives".

Other mothers were keen to let off steam about their wayward daughters, with occasionally very troubling consequences in terms of my power/knowledge. Having located twenty-three year-old Jessica's address via the electoral roll, I called at her house one day. Jessica was out but her mother, with whom she had recently returned to live, chatted to me at length and revealed that Jessica had been married, had a baby who was now adopted, and was now separated from her husband. When I interviewed Jessica four months later, after she had moved again to live with her new boyfriend and his parents, she made no mention of these (unspeakable) events. I feigned ignorance. As well as making me feel profoundly uncomfortable knowing things that she did not wish me to know, Jessica's silence and her mother's disclosure illustrate the often invisible pains of self-narration.

Refusing To Tell: The Pains Of Self-Narration

If knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988), so too are silences. Refusal to participate in research can be interpreted as a self-protective strategy to avoid or minimise the potentially harmful emotional and material consequences of self-narration. For middle-class women the flip side of the reflexivity that is sought in qualitative longitudinal research may be an entreaty to self-monitor and self-regulate (Yates, 2003). For working-class women, by contrast, the regulatory gaze is more likely to emanate from others. Steedman (2000) has demonstrated how the ‘telling’ of the self for the working-class has always been a moral enterprise concerned with the display of respectability and social worth. Code (1995: 21) has argued that poor, working-class, and non-white women – those who “can claim less public credibility than others” - cannot be sure that knowledge about them that circulates publicly will represent their interests.

A poor woman living in the shadow of a criminal past must present herself to social workers as a good (enough) mother, to welfare assessors as deserving of state financial aid, and to probation officers as having gone, and remained, straight. Many participants had been and/or still were subject to social surveillance by welfare services regarding accusations of child neglect (sometimes, according to participants, fabricated by neighbours or associates – a form of gendered bullying) or in relation to efforts to re-gain custody of their children. All had been the subjects of criminal justice risk assessment and practices, and many were required to undergo ‘work capability’ and other (increasingly stringent) eligibility assessments in relation to claims for financial assistance for themselves and their children. These interactions, the attendant enforced disclosure, and the need for this disclosure to be accepted as genuine and not untruthful, exaggerated or otherwise bogus, no doubt coloured some

participants' responses to being asked to (re-)tell their story to yet another middle-class professional. As Skeggs (2004: 134) has claimed:

What has been defined as the condition of (post)modernity – that is, the reflexive self – is a very specific class formation, strongly resisted by those who are put under constant scrutiny and forced to tell in ways not of their own making.

Just one woman refused outright to be interviewed again. Having located Jordan's address via 192.com, we had a lengthy conversation on her doorstep, she wearing a dressing gown while her two young children played inside. Jordan told me that, having received a three-month youth community order when she was 15, living "here, there and everywhere" and experiencing problems at home, she had not been in any trouble during the intervening seven years. She reflected that she felt embarrassed at having been "such a twat" in her youth, but it was "all in the past now" and she would rather not bring things up again. Feeling bad about keeping her talking on the doorstep on a very cold February day, I left my contact details and urged her to get in touch if she changed her mind.

The years between late teenage and early twenties are a time of rapid development and personal change: leaving home (often involuntarily) and becoming a mother were the most common transitions amongst participants, while paid employment was much less common (often due to the demands of lone motherhood), and involvement in tertiary education exceptional. For many, these transitions were accompanied by trauma: the majority of the women had been victims of intimate partner violence,

which had only rarely resulted in prosecution, and several women's children had been removed due to concerns about their safety. It was clear from some interviews and from doorstep conversations with women who declined to participate in the research again that many had experienced various combinations of depression, alcoholism, drug addiction and battles with social services and ex-partners over the care and custody of their children, in addition to periods of imprisonment and probation supervision.

When I first interviewed nineteen-year-old Laura in 2005 in the company of her two-month old baby girl and then-boyfriend, she was very talkative but somewhat suspicious of my motives when I asked her about her criminal past, having been 'let down' by youth justice workers in the past and, by her own account, often 'refusing to speak to anyone' (professional). After being taken into foster care when she was two years old and adopted at nine, Laura's adoptive parents 'kicked her out' two years later. Following a spell of sofa surfing, 'getting wrecked' and sometimes sleeping rough, Laura spent her teenage years in a children's home, followed by periods in bail hostels, shared houses, more sofa surfing and a short prison sentence, before finally moving into her own flat when she was eighteen.

Seven years later I re-traced Laura and corresponded with her briefly on Facebook. She gave me her telephone number and address and we arranged to meet. Laura initially thought I might be able to help her regain custody of her children. Three months, numerous telephone calls and home visits and several cancelled meetings later, Laura eventually explained, when I asked if she would rather I stop contacting her, that she had a lot on her mind and would find it upsetting to talk. Repeat

interviews may facilitate the building of trust (although this is perhaps rather less likely when there is a gap of several years between interviews). But they may also have normative effects implying an expectation of development and progress (Thomson & Holland, 2003). It is likely that some women whose lives had gone downhill or backwards, if only in the recent past, declined to talk to me again out of shame or fear of negative appraisal.

I found it particularly difficult to re-establish contact with any of the small number of black and mixed race participants in the original sample,⁵ finally re-interviewing three out of six black participants in the follow-up, but none of the four women who had been in youth custody at the first wave of the study. In one case this was due to having no contact information. However, two mixed race white and black Caribbean women agreed to meet me before proving impossible to pin down. One was a mother and the other was expecting her first child, and it may be that both, whilst not wishing to be impolite, eschewed external scrutiny by a white woman who knew of their history of imprisonment. hooks (1990: 151-2) has famously exposed black women's history of being colonised and "othered" through ventriloquism in the research process, entreated to tell their stories while having their own voices suppressed:

no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you [...] in such a way that it has become mine, my own. [...] I am still author, authority.

⁵ The one Asian woman in the original study was keen to talk to me again, however.

Black young women experience negative appraisals in the classroom (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Wright, 2005) and the courtroom (Feilzer & Hood, 2004; May et al., 2010), usually emanating from the social groups (white, middle-class) to which I belong. Perhaps the participants who ‘refused’, through silence or strategies of evasion, to talk to me again did not trust me to do them good, or to represent them accurately.

Concluding Reflections

The line between persistence and pestering in re-establishing contact with, and repeat participation by, people in qualitative longitudinal research can be a thin one, something that is rarely acknowledged in ‘how to’ accounts of ‘successful’ (i.e. attrition-minimising) re-tracing efforts. In this article I have attended to some of the problematic and ethically ambiguous aspects of re-tracing an already over-surveilled and socially stigmatised group: criminalised women. I have intentionally represented the surveillant potential of the qualitative longitudinal research process in its starker forms in an attempt to take seriously the power dynamics inherent in the re-tracing process. I acknowledge that the term ‘stalking’ is over-used in popular discourse and often employed flippantly. On the other hand it describes criminal behaviour involving harassment and intimidation, which provokes substantial fear or even terror. I use the term as a rhetorical device intended to foreground the affective state of the researcher as much as the experience of research participants. I have reflected on the important epistemological implications of researcher reflexivity and emotion in relation to data collection, analysis and interpretation; however, my primary focus has

been the effects of researcher power and positionality, enacted through a particular set of research methods, on participants themselves.

I believe that sharing some aspects of structural positioning – gender and motherhood – with many participants, as well as my being the sole fieldworker at both waves of the study, helped me to establish rapport and to gain women’s agreement to participate in the study again, and ultimately led to me obtaining ‘better’ data.

However, these affinities were frequently underscored by social difference and dis-identification due to my age, class and occupational status. I was/am a white, middle-class, credentialed, ‘older’ mother, and my (then only) small child was looked after at a private nursery while I worked. While social distance may result in the concealment of information, the converse can also be true: being an Outsider, in terms of social positioning and geography, may have advantages. My unfamiliarity with participants’ lives and social circumstances may have elicited greater disclosure. On the other hand, class, age, and sometimes ethnic, differences between myself and the majority of participants may have impeded rapport and even caused suspicion regarding my motives. It is impossible to assess the extent to which my identity as a white, middle-class, not-so-young woman encouraged or discouraged participation in the study, or affected the nature and depth of participants’ accounts or the manner of their telling. As a lone researcher, this is a moot point.⁶ Either way, as Skeggs (2004: 126) has argued, one’s structural positioning “does not necessarily give access to ways of knowing”.

⁶ See Phillips & Earle (2010) for an excellent account of a two-person research team with contrasting identities and biographical histories.

By reflecting on the (possible) experiences of the women I have re-traced and re-interviewed (or not), I have spoken for ‘them’ and documented how I think ‘they’ may have felt. Consequently I may of course be accused of ventriloquism. I did consider asking participants to reflect on their experiences of the research and re-tracing process. However, this seemed too much to ask in what was, in most cases, a one-off interview. Participants gave generously of their time and shared often painful personal stories, even when the demands of children, financial worries and health concerns were pressing. Several women commented positively on the interview process, stating that it had been cathartic (c.f. Thomson and Holland, 2003), or that it had affirmed how much they had matured and their lives improved since their teenage years. Some expressed hope and enthusiasm that their stories and experiences might be put to good use in helping other women and girls. Others were more pessimistic about the likelihood of change, though none expressed cynicism about the study.

An important question arising from this reflexive account is whether qualitative longitudinal research intrudes too much into the lives of very marginalised and stigmatised populations. On this point I concur with Ward and Henderson (2003) that anyone considered too ‘vulnerable’ to participate should not be re-interviewed. Qualitative longitudinal research has substantial value in terms of challenging and complicating assumptions that pathways from troubled youth into dangerous and/or dependent adulthood are predictable and inflexible, and also for revealing how individuals’ lived experiences of social censure and opprobrium, as well as their psychic and material consequences, play out over time. However, there is a need to tread carefully and lightly when planning and undertaking fieldwork. The following suggestions may assist future researchers to avoid or minimise harm to participants.

An individual's refusal to participate in research should be accepted unquestioningly and no attempt made to persuade, cajole or bribe her/him into being interviewed.

Participants – especially young women – living in precarious circumstances may be experiencing distress or trauma, for example, in relation to ongoing child protection or custody proceedings, drug/alcohol relapse or domestic violence victimisation.

When a participant has been re-located it may be necessary to delay arranging an interview, sometimes for a lengthy period, to avoid causing further distress. Finally, and more generally, neither the desire to maximise participant retention nor curiosity about how an individual's life has unfolded can ever defensibly take precedence over respect for privacy and avoidance of psychological harm, albeit that the judgment can be a difficult one to make. Integrity must always prevail.

Focusing attention on the power dynamics inherent in re-tracing and re-interviewing criminalised participants emphasises researchers' considerable ethical responsibilities in undertaking (longitudinal) fieldwork with stigmatised groups, enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which knowledge about them is produced and ultimately enriches scholarly engagement with the social worlds of (ex-)lawbreakers. The methodological account I have presented in this article has implications for longitudinal research with criminalised men as well as women. However, experiences of surveillance – and attendant stigma - are gendered, classed and racialized, as well as generational. Women's law-breaking attracts intense stigma as well as assignments of class - and sometimes heterosexual - inferiority (Schur, 1984; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). Equally (and sometimes more) important in terms of social censure in the lives of women (former) lawbreakers are discourses that demonise poor women's histories of drug use (Campbell, 2000), their (non-)involvement in paid work and

their reproductive choices. Against a backdrop of pervasive popular myths of welfare opportunism as a lifestyle choice, young lone mothers are frequent targets in the neoliberal political vilification of Britain's poor (Tyler, 2008). The enduring, and sometimes apparently insurmountable, reputational damage experienced by women who break the law amplifies the need for heightened ethical sensitivity when researching this population longitudinally.

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