

# Ethical dilemmas when conducting sensitive research: interviewing offenders convicted of child pornography

Marie Eneman

*Department of Applied IT, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article aims to describe the personal experience and ethical dilemmas that the author encountered when conducting qualitative research on a highly sensitive topic, i.e. interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study uses an autoethnographic approach to describe and reflect on my personal experience, emotions and ethical dilemmas when undertaking sensitive research that examines illegal acts.

**Findings** – Ethical dilemmas and emotional challenges highlighted refer to the issue of access to useful empirical material, conducting interviews with convicted offenders in prison environments, the complexity surrounding confidentiality when interviewing offenders about their criminal activities, vulnerability and insecurity for the researcher and emotional challenges for the researcher when listening to the offenders' stories describing serious crimes against children.

**Originality/value** – This article contributes with insights and reflections on conducting qualitative research with a marginalized and stigmatized group in prison environments.

**Keywords** Sensitive qualitative research, Child pornography, Offenders, Autoethnography, Ethical dilemmas, Emotional challenges, Vulnerability and insecurity

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

This article highlights practical challenges and ethical dilemmas that I encountered when conducting qualitative research on a highly sensitive topic, i.e. interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography. The term “child pornography” refers to material depicting the sexual exploitation of children, ranging from images of children posing (usually naked) to material portraying physical sexual abuse (Gillespie, 2012; Taylor and Quayle, 2003). Sexual abuse is one of the most heinous acts that a child can be subjected to, where both the abuse itself and the documentation (when it has been photographed or filmed) constitute serious crimes in many countries (Eneman, 2005). The increasing availability and use of the internet in recent decades, together with the development of other sophisticated technologies, has



drastically changed the conditions for individuals with a sexual interest in children – for example, in searching for and contacting potential victims, and by facilitating and accelerating the production, distribution and accessing/downloading of child pornography (Howitt and Sheldon, 2007; Eneman *et al.*, 2009).

Conducting research that involves offenders and their criminal behaviour raises a number of practical challenges and ethical dilemmas. This type of sensitive research requires that all stages of the research process should be permeated by good research ethics (Noaks and Wincup, 2017; Wiles, 2013). A central part of research ethics is about how people who participate in research (for example, as respondents) may be treated. An important principle for researchers is the responsibility to protect research participants from harm or violations in connection with their participation in research, but sometimes situations can arise where researchers need to use their discretion to balance different legitimate interests, for example, in relation to the issue of confidentiality (Cowburn, 2005). Ethical considerations play an important role in the quality of research in general and in sensitive research in particular, and guidelines have been developed to assist researchers. This article connects to some of the ethical guidelines formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2017) and by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) working group (Ess *et al.*, 2002; Franzke *et al.*, 2020).

The term “sensitive research” has been used to describe themes that may be considered intrusive and/or harmful to research participants and/or to the researcher (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Although sensitivity is a subjective experience that arises relationally through interaction and negotiation in relationship with others, it is still possible to predict in advance sensitivity regarding certain topics that may give rise to various challenges for the researcher. In general, these are topics that are considered taboo or stigmatizing in society (for example, child sexual abuse and child pornography) and that are often related to harmful and illegal behaviour (Hilário and Augusto, 2020). There is a close connection between the concept of vulnerability and sensitivity because research involving groups that are considered marginalized and stigmatized as offenders will undoubtedly give rise to a number of ethical dilemmas for the researcher, not least by taking part in stories that describe illegal and harmful acts (Jupp, 2016; Brookman *et al.*, 2017). Researchers (Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013; Lee, 1993) argue that researchers working with marginalized and stigmatized groups are particularly vulnerable because they are most likely to be exposed to emotional encounters and narratives that can be outrageous and difficult to deal with. Research involving criminals convicted of child pornography can be described as emotionally demanding research (Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018), i.e. research that most likely will affect the researcher emotionally (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010). A significant part of literature on sensitive research emphasizes the importance of ethical guidelines and strategies for ensuring good protection for research participants, such as respondents, while less attention has been paid to researchers’ vulnerability, safety and need for protection (Shaw *et al.*, 2020).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section presents the context of child pornography, followed by a description of the approach used and the practical challenges and ethical dilemmas encountered; then the article concludes with final reflections.

## 2. Child pornography

The term “child pornography” refers to material depicting the sexual exploitation of children, ranging from images of children posing (usually naked) to material portraying physical sexual abuse (Howitt and Sheldon, 2007; Eneman *et al.*, 2009). The media all too often tend to report on child pornography as if it were a new phenomenon that has arisen in connection with the increasing digitalization in society, which is a misunderstanding. It has existed in society for a long time and has occurred through the media that have been available, for example, through physical magazines, photographs and videos

(Howitt and Sheldon, 2007). Creating the material, accessing it and distributing it was previously more limited by access to technical equipment and economic, physical and logistical aspects (Gillespie, 2012). However, emerging technologies have drastically changed this and facilitated access for individuals with a sexual interest in children. Today, many have access to technical equipment through their mobile phones, digital cameras, webcams, etc., which can easily be used to photograph and film. These can be used by people with a sexual interest in children to produce, distribute, download and watch child pornography (Howitt and Sheldon, 2007; Eneman *et al.*, 2009; Eneman, 2020).

In addition to being a crime in many Western countries, child pornography is an illustrative example of one of the most problematic areas of harmful use of emerging technologies. The ability to use technology to communicate with and create networks of like-minded individuals who share a sexual interest in children is considered an important aspect (Davidson and Bifulco, 2018). Within these networks, they make contacts and share and exchange useful information and child pornographic material. The legal responses to child pornography vary widely between different jurisdictions. However, the complex problems and challenges of legal and societal responses to child pornography have been recognized and placed on the political agenda in many countries (Gillespie, 2012; Akdeniz, 2016). The fight against child sexual abuse, including child pornography, is also a priority for the European Union (EU). Both the European Parliament and the Council have called for further concrete measures to develop strong and comprehensive responses to these crimes, both offline and online. Recently, the European Commission (COM (206) 607 final, 2020) presented a strategy for more effective fight against child sexual abuse. The current Swedish legislation (the Swedish Code of Statutes, the Penal Code, Chapter 16, Crime against public order, 10a §) criminalizes the creation (production), distribution and possession of child pornography, including fictitious child pornography, through its formulations “anybody that depicts a child in a pornographic image”, “distribute such image” and “possess such image”. The prohibition of such depiction does not include drawings or paintings produced for artistic merit. Swedish legislation has, compared with England and Wales for example, been slow to tackle the technological developments and challenges (Akdeniz, 2001; Gillespie, 2012). The creation and distribution of child pornography was made an offence in 1980 in Sweden and the possession of child pornography became a criminal offence first in 1999. The legislation was deliberately designed to be technology-neutral and not technology-specific (Akdeniz, 2001), with one exception when the possession offence was extended in 2010 to also include the act of viewing child pornography online (even when the files were not intentionally downloaded) (The Justice Committee’s report, 2019).

### 3. Approach

The approach for this article is inspired by an autoethnographic approach (Adams *et al.*, 2022; Jewkes, 2011; Hård af Segerstad, 2021) to describe and reflect on my personal experiences of conducting interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography. Autoethnography as a method challenges canonical ways of doing research and recognizes how personal experience influences the research process (Adams *et al.*, 2022). The method has become popular in social sciences as it acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, vulnerability, reflexivity and the researcher’s influence on research (Adams *et al.*, 2014). Reflexivity should, in this context, be understood as the strive of making the researcher’s position and experiences visible (Rowe, 2014). The focus on the researcher’s experiences means that the author of an autoethnographic study can be described as both subject and researcher (Coffey, 2002). The literature (Rowe, 2014; Jewkes, 2011; Ricciardelli

and Spencer, 2014) highlights the importance of researchers shedding light on subjective experiences when conducting research in prison environments, as the prison differs significantly from other social institutions. Gacek (2021) reminds us that research in the prison environment inevitably gives rise to challenges and limitations and therefore research ethics are central. According to Markham (2006, 2018), research ethics and methods are strongly intertwined and should not be separated. Research ethics permeates the entire research process, which is also emphasized by the ethical guidelines developed by AoIR (Ess *et al.*, 2002; franzke *et al.*, 2020).

The research that underlies the autoethnographic approach in this article is based on interviews with a total number of 15 offenders, where five of them were interviewed on more than one occasion. The overall purpose of the interviews was to take part in the individual offenders' own stories about their activities linked to child pornography and the role of technology. I conducted all the semi-structured interviews with the 15 offenders – all men, the youngest 19 years old and the oldest 55 years old. All 15 offenders had been convicted of production and/or distribution and/or possession of child pornography by Swedish courts. The offenders came from a variety of demographic backgrounds in terms of marital status, family situation, education and occupation. Among these 15 offenders, 11 had also been convicted of other sexual offences, mainly sexual abuse of children and in some cases also of sexual offences against women, including rape. Although these other crimes were not the focus of my research, I was emotionally affected by the awareness of them. All the interviews took place in a prison environment, more specifically in two different Swedish prisons with offenders convicted of sexual offences and child pornography.

When conducting social science research in Sweden, which also undergoes an ethical approval via the Swedish Ethics Review Authority, the so-called individual protection requirement is a central starting point for ethical considerations. The requirement means that individuals who participate in research should be protected from mental or physical harm, humiliation or violation (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). This means that prior to each research study, the responsible researcher must weigh the expected knowledge contribution against possible risks in the form of negative consequences for research participants, as well as for third parties who may be affected. The individual protection requirement has been divided into the following four ethical principles, which are intended to guide researchers in the planning and implementation of research: the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement and the utilization requirement. The principles should not be seen as a manual and do not claim to be complete; they are deliberately formulated to guide and provide norms regarding the relationship between researchers and research participants. The intention of the principles is not to replace researchers' own assessments and responsibilities, but rather to guide researchers to further reflection and insights about their own responsibility.

Early in the planning of the research, I sent an application for ethical approval to the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (the Ethics Review Act, 2003:460), which was approved and served as important and valuable guidelines on handling ethical aspects regarding research participants, material collection, analysis, storage of materials, publication of results and also archiving of materials. The fact that the research was formally ethically approved also contributed to creating increased credibility and legitimacy for the research (Adorjan and Ricciardelli, 2016) which had a decisive role in accessing the empirical field, where contact was made with the Swedish Prison and Probation Service as a first step.

#### 4. Practical challenges and ethical dilemmas

The practical challenges and ethical dilemmas that I encountered when conducting qualitative research with criminals convicted of child pornography are presented here in the form of three vignettes: accessing the field, being in the field and leaving the field.

##### *4.1 Accessing the field*

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One of the first challenges to deal with as a researcher when conducting research on a sensitive topic that also constitutes a criminal offence – as here offenders' behaviour in relation to child pornography – is the question of access to empirical material. Accessing the domain of child pornography is difficult and involves both certain practical and ethical considerations (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010; Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). This includes, for example, how to gain access to people who have experience of this domain, as they can be characterized as a hard-to-reach group for people from the outside (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014; Morgan and Lambie, 2019).

Because many actions surrounding child pornography are illegal in many countries (Gillespie, 2012), it is most unlikely that people involved in these activities would be willing to discuss their activities prior to conviction (Taylor and Quayle, 2003). It would also be an extremely difficult and complex issue, practically, ethically and legally, for a researcher to try to gain access to non-convicted people who have experience in activities related to child pornography where offenders have contacted (potential) victims (Noaks and Wincup, 2017; Ray, Kimonis and Donoghue, 2010; Blagden and Pemberton, 2010). An alternative approach is therefore to focus on convicted offenders who have been involved in these types of crimes (Taylor and Quayle, 2003).

I therefore focused on trying to conduct interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography while they were serving their sentences in a prison environment. Individual interviews with offenders have been described as an invaluable source for better understanding criminal behaviour (Presser, 2010; Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014; Morgan and Lambie, 2019).

To gain access to offenders willing to participate in the study and be interviewed, I contacted the Swedish Prison and Probation Service via email to investigate the possibilities. Shortly afterwards, I was called by a person who worked centrally within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service with research activities and who wanted to hear more about the study. They asked me to send an information letter that clearly described the research study. I sent over the information letter I had already written that described the purpose of the study, the purpose of the interviews, the interview template with the questions, how the material will be used, who will have access to the material, how the material will be stored during the study, how the material will be archived when the study is completed and that the study has undergone an ethics test and been approved (a copy of the decision regarding the ethics test was attached). The letter also contained a short presentation about me as the responsible researcher at the University of Gothenburg, and brief information about the research funders. I emphasized that participation was voluntary, that the respondent could choose to cancel his participation at any time and that no material would then be used, that the respondent could choose to refrain from answering certain questions if he so wished, that the material will only be used for research and how I as a researcher apply the question of confidentiality in relation to the respondents and their stories. I presented my approach to confidentiality as follows: I will handle information that comes to my knowledge during the interviews confidentially as long as the content does not describe an ongoing crime or a crime that will take place. If such a situation arises, I will inform my contact person within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. When

publishing the results of the study, I will take measures in line with good research ethics to ensure that no individuals can be identified and will also not describe unique events that may risk being traced to an individual.

My letter was then forwarded within their organization to a prison psychologist who worked with the type of offenders I wanted to interview. The prison psychologist contacted me by phone and then for a conversation about the selection of offenders for the interviews. The selection of offenders for the interviews was thus made by the prison psychologist who, in addition to taking into account my information letter and criteria, also based the selection on two other important aspects before inviting offenders to participate in the study – namely, whether the individual offender was in an appropriate phase in his therapy (which according to the prison psychologist meant that the offender was not in the stage of denial) and whether the offender was considered a suitable respondent to interview purely in terms of security for me as a researcher.

The complexity and challenges of informed consent in this context should be highlighted. As a researcher, I was completely dependent on a prison psychologist (as a form of gatekeeper) contacting the prisoners and asking if they could participate in the study through individual interviews. I really have no knowledge or control over what was said in the conversation between the psychologist and the prisoners, i.e. how the informed consent in practice took place in this phase. This further emphasizes the potential risks of power relations that may arise and also affect the notion of consent.

#### *4.2 Being in the field*

As mentioned above, 15 male offenders agreed to participate in the study and five of them were interviewed on more than one occasion, as they had a great deal of interesting information to share and wanted to continue the conversation in a later interview. All 15 respondents accepted my approach to the issue of confidentiality (Israel, 2004). I only conducted one interview each time I visited the prison; this was a conscious choice as I wanted to be able to focus entirely on the individual interview and I understood in advance that I would most likely take part in emotionally difficult stories about serious crimes involving children during the interviews.

*4.2.1 Prison environment.* All interviews took place in a prison environment, more specifically in two different Swedish prisons that were both institutions exclusively for sexual offenders. The practical approach to getting into the prisons was the same for the two prisons; when I arrived outside the prison, I had to ring a bell with a camera at the gate and had to state my name and case, who I would meet for the interview and the name of the prison psychologist who was my contact person. After that, I was admitted and walked to the entrance of the prison where the guards sat. There I had to identify myself and hand in my mobile phone to the guards for the duration of my visit, and pass through a security system with alarms. One of the guards then followed me to the room where the interview with the offender was to take place.

The first three interviews were conducted in a visiting room at the prison. The visiting room was a fairly large room, furnished with sofa, bed, dining table and chairs. There was also a “children’s corner” with toys such as Lego and stuffed animals and books. I was always let into the room first and had a few minutes to prepare the material I would use – an interview guide, a copy of the information letter, pen, pad and a dictaphone. Then, another guard came in with the respondent, together with a tray with coffee and cakes. After that, the guard informed us that we had a maximum of 2 h available for the interview and then left the room. Thus, I was alone in the visiting room with the offender and the door to the room was closed. For all the interviews, I asked the offenders whether they wanted to tell me

what they had been convicted of. When the respondent during the third interview told me about the crimes he was convicted of regarding child pornography, and then also revealed that he was simultaneously convicted of raping a woman, resulting in a sentence of several years, I understood that the crime must have been serious, given our sentences for that type of crime in Sweden. This information made me feel vulnerable and insecure and I immediately started thinking about my own safety in the room. It was only there and then that I realized that I did not know whether there was an alarm button available if something were to happen. I also reflected that the entrance where the guards were sitting was some distance away and that they probably would not hear if anything happened and I needed to call for help. Despite this, the interview went well, but after that, I contacted the prison psychologist and explained what had happened and asked for another room for the upcoming interviews. During the conversation with the prison psychologist, it transpired that there was no alarm button in the visiting room. The prison psychologist then arranged for me to use an office and meeting room directly adjacent to their offices for the remaining interviews, which I as a researcher felt much more secure with.

*4.2.2 Interviews.* I began each interview with the respective respondent by briefly introducing myself based on my professional research role; thereafter, I returned to the content of the information letter distributed to all the respondents in advance (as described above). I took time to also orally inform and ensure that the respondent understood the purpose of the study, how the material would be used, the issues of informed consent and confidentiality and that participation was completely voluntary (Israel, 2004; Blagden and Pemberton, 2010). Then, I asked if it was ok to record the interview using my dictaphone and explained that no one else would handle the audio recordings. At this stage, I also asked whether the respondent had any questions or concerns before I started the interview. Research literature describes that it can be challenging to encourage people to talk about sensitive aspects of their criminal or socially unacceptable behaviour (Lee, 1993; Jupp, 2016; Noaks and Wincup, 2017). Therefore, certain strategies have been proposed when interviewing offenders on sensitive topics, which inspired me (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; Taylor and Quayle, 2003). It is recommended that the researcher takes as neutral an attitude as possible when interviewing offenders, especially when they have been convicted of crimes that are emotional and involve a high degree of social condemnation (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014; Cowburn, 2005). Furthermore, it is recommended that researchers start by asking less emotional questions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012), so this study started with questions about demographic aspects and then continued with questions about the individual offender's activities, what technologies were used and how they were used. In the cases where the offender had used technology to produce child pornography, the issue was raised later in the interview because of its sensitive nature and direct connection with physical sexual abuse of a child. The overall aim with the interviews was to obtain the individual offenders' own stories of their activities related to child pornography and the technologies involved, and for this reason, the interview questions were designed as broad questions. All interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h, with a majority lasting between 1.5 and 2 h.

*4.2.3 Dilemmas with confidentiality.* It should be noted that research involving convicted offenders may involve respondents revealing potentially illegal issues or other forms of sensitive material; it is therefore important that the researcher is prepared for this and has a strategy for handling such information (Lee, 1993; Israel, 2004; Cowburn, 2005). During one of the interviews, the respondent said that on his last leave, he had been in contact with young girls through the Internet and that he planned to physically meet one of them during his next leave. After the interview, I decided to break the confidentiality towards the respondent and shared this with the prison psychologist. For me as a researcher, this was

morally correct and also in line with my described research approach regarding confidentiality in my information letter. I can add that I don't know what happened after I told the prison psychologist about this.

The complexity of confidentiality and ethical dilemmas that can arise has been highlighted by several other researchers (Israel, 2004; Blagden and Pemberton, 2010). Scully (1990) describes in her study of rapists in a prison environment that it is necessary to clarify that the researcher's obligation towards research participants is limited if the researcher receives information that risks harming or endangering another person. Further, Fuller (1993) raised the dilemma of confidentiality in her study with 13 men convicted of sexual offences against children, where she suggested that researchers should be able to apply "limited confidentiality" when receiving knowledge of ongoing illegal behaviours such as child sexual abuse. The concept of trade-offs (Jupp, 2016) has been introduced to describe when researchers need to balance competing principles.

*4.2.4 Vulnerability in the field.* The interviews with offenders took place in a prison environment where only sexual offenders were imprisoned. The location of the interviews with convicted offenders is an important factor and something that researchers should keep in mind in relation to their own safety, but it may be more difficult to control when access has been given to interview offenders in criminal justice institutions (Jewkes, 2011). Noaks and Wincup (2017) have described that prison as an environment for research can feel both unusual and unpleasant. Before the interviews in this study, I had never been to a prison and now that I reflect on my approach, I regret that I did not visit the prison once before the first interview, for example, for a conversation with the prison psychologist and the guards to talk about security aspects and for a first encounter with the environment.

A central ethical principle is to ensure that research participants are not exposed to harm, danger or insults and that researchers should strive to make the respondent to feel comfortable during the interview. Based on my own research experiences, I want to emphasize that it is at least as important to focus on ensuring that the researcher does not end up in a situation that is perceived as vulnerable or insecure (Shaw *et al.*, 2020). This is an even more important issue when it comes to interviewing people convicted of crimes (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010).

As described above, I conducted the first interviews in a visiting room at the prison but felt very scared, vulnerable and insecure in that room when the respondent told me that he also was convicted of a rape of an adult woman. I realized that I had not considered any security routines – for example, whether there was an alarm button available in the visiting room. The interview went well, but after that I asked the prison psychologist to change the allocated room and I used a room directly adjacent to their office instead.

The stories that I listened to during the interviews were valuable for my research, but it should also be recognized that those stories were in many ways emotionally intense and difficult to absorb – some stories more than others. Shaw *et al.* (2020) emphasize that the key to dealing with emotional challenges from research engagement is to acknowledge that it is happening and ensure strategies for dealing with such situations. Throughout my research, I have regularly talked to a psychologist through the occupational health care that our university provides. This has been and still is an important professional support for me and is the only forum where I can talk openly and freely about the stories I have listened to that describe serious crimes against children, and how that has affected me both as a researcher and as a human being. After each interview in the prison environment, I talked with the prison psychologist shortly before I left the prison. The prison psychologist only wanted to know if the interview had gone well. It was a good way to end each visit in the prison environment.

#### *4.3 Leaving the field*

I transcribed all the interviews with the offenders in line with the ethical approval; this process began after each interview. It should be noted that empirical material consisting of interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography represents only the individuals who have been arrested and convicted (Taylor and Quayle, 2003). This means that the material must be interpreted carefully because arrested and convicted offenders represent only a fraction of all offenders engaged in these activities, and that crimes such as child pornography and sexual abuse of children have a very low reporting rate (Gillespie, 2012; Eneman, 2005). When publishing the results of the study, I took measures in line with good research ethics to ensure that no individuals can be identified. This is not only about managing information about individuals but also about managing information about unique situations and events that may risk being related to individuals (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010).

An important ethical dimension is to inform the respondents in advance whom they can turn to if questions or concerns arise afterwards about their participation in the research. I explained this in writing in the information letter that was sent to the prison service and that was then distributed to respondents. I also informed the respondents orally before the start of each interview. Three of the interviewed offenders contacted me a couple of months afterwards via email. Their purpose in contacting me was not related to their participation in the study but more about talking about their situation of being convicted of crimes that are considered completely unacceptable by most individuals in society. I thought it felt uncomfortable to receive these emails, it felt too close into my private sphere despite the fact that they were sent to my formal email at the university. The dilemma with blurred boundaries, where offenders contact researchers for other purposes, such as here when they sought contact with me as a form of conversational therapist, has attracted attention in the literature (Jupp, 2016; Howitt and Sheldon, 2007).

The stories I took part in during the interviews with the offenders convicted of child pornography still remain even after leaving the empirical field. As with other qualitative research, the material consists of audio recordings, field notes and transcripts. In addition to that, I carry with me the stories I listened to. Taking part in the offenders' own stories when they have been involved in producing, distributing or watching child pornography has been emotionally demanding for me both as a researcher and as a human being. But I interpret my own reaction as healthy and wholesome, as child pornography is a terrible crime against children. Research (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007, 2009) points out that although there is a growing awareness that researchers conducting qualitative studies on sensitive topics are emotionally affected, there is still a lack of studies on how sensitive research topics can affect researchers emotionally (Shaw *et al.*, 2020). I have on a few occasions been asked why I want to research something as horrible as child pornography; my short answer is that I am driven by a strong commitment and belief that more research is needed to be able to achieve societal changes where stronger protection for children is developed.

#### **5. Concluding remarks**

Inspired by an autoethnographic approach (Adams *et al.*, 2014, 2022), I have in this article described my personal experiences and dilemmas that I encountered when conducting qualitative research on a highly sensitive topic, i.e. interviews with offenders convicted of child pornography. This group of offenders can be described as a marginalized and stigmatized group (Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013) in society through their involvement in a crime that most people regard as totally unacceptable. The challenges and dilemmas

highlighted refer to the issue of access to useful empirical material (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010), conducting interviews with convicted offenders in prison environments (Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014), the complexity of confidentiality (Cowburn, 2005; Israel, 2004) when interviewing offenders about their criminal activities, vulnerability and insecurity for the researcher (Shaw *et al.*, 2020) and emotional challenges (Jewkes, 2011) for the researcher when listening to the offenders' stories describing serious crimes against children (Taylor and Quayle, 2003). An additional dilemma that researchers may encounter in this area is finding a well-balanced approach between reproducing information about the offenders' actions that contributes to professional knowledge development and without risking contributing to further exploitation of crimes that have occurred.

Finally, it should be emphasized that my personal motivation to conduct research within this area is based on my ambition to develop knowledge that can be used for policymaking to strengthen the protection of children in our society. For me as a researcher, it is valuable to know that my research results have been used by law enforcement agencies to inform the design of new legislation and also during the review of existing legislation. My research has been ethically approved. In addition, further precautions have been taken to protect the privacy of those involved in this study, for example, by avoiding very unique descriptions that could reveal individuals. I hope that my experiences of conducting research on a highly sensitive topic surrounded by a number of challenges and dilemmas in our digital society can offer inspiration and support to other researchers approaching these kinds of sensitive themes.

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### Corresponding author

Marie Eneman can be contacted at: [marie.eneman@gu.se](mailto:marie.eneman@gu.se)

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