Negotiating ‘Victim Communities’: Reflexivity and Method in Researching High Profile Crimes

Dr Nicola O’Leary

Introduction

Certain crimes seem to embody the mood of the times, entering the public consciousness in such an enduring way that they almost become public property. Crimes such as the killing of James Bulger (1993) and the disappearance of Madeleine McCann (2007) have reached such prominence, attracting large amounts of sustained media coverage and popular attention. However, many such serious crimes typically involve a range of harms to multiple victims, not only to individuals or immediate groups, but also often on a broader level to others that live and are connected to the location where the crime took place.

This chapter aims to contribute to the discussions of reflexivity in criminological research by detailing some of my own reflective experiences as a qualitative researcher attempting to explore such ‘victim communities’. The research reflections below are based on a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations at two research sites as part of my doctoral research. These communities were witness to two of the most high profile and highly mediatised crimes in recent decades in the United Kingdom; the school shootings in Dunblane (1996) and killings of school girls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham (2002). As a previously un-researched and powerless group who have experienced victimisation, this research attempts to explore how a serious crime event may affect the wider community involved, how they collectively come to terms with the trauma, stigma and aftermath of a highly
mediatised ‘signal crime’ (Innes, 2003). Innes defines signal crimes as events that, in addition to affecting immediate participants, impact in some way upon a wider audience (2003: 52). Here and in addition, the notion bears some similarity to ‘moral panics’ and the ‘broken windows’ thesis; where an offence or incident, when experienced or seen, may trigger a change in public behaviour or beliefs).

**Reflexivity in Method**

All social actors are reflexive agents; in the sense that they are able to continually alter their behaviour in response to the situations they are experiencing (Giddens, 1990). What is different about the reflexivity of social researchers is that they attempt to moderate their own responses while observing the responses of other social agents; as such ‘subsequent activity can be altered by virtue of reflection-based knowledge’ (Ransome, 2013: 83). However, a reflexive approach to social science research is not for everyone. Some criminological researchers are not prepared, nor do they see the value in interrogating the notion of self in their research, not least because they see self-reflection as a distraction from what the research is ‘really about’ (Crewe, 2009). However, although by no means universal, in many other social science fields and indeed in some criminological research discussions, the importance of being reflexive is increasingly acknowledged with the attention focused on recognising the social location of the researcher, as well as the ways in which our emotional responses to participants shape the emotional account (Piacentini, 2013). Significantly, reflexivity in such cases emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, political and cultural consciousness and ownership of one’s perspective, all of which are vital in academic research seeking to maximize the significance of emotional experience. Relationships
and our reflexive awareness of them, have an impact at every level of the research process.

With the above in mind, this chapter details a reflective approach to some of the theoretical and practical issues involved in conducting empirical fieldwork of a sensitive nature with members of a ‘victim community’ and addresses how I as the researcher negotiated an unfamiliar and sometimes unreceptive environment. Although the fieldwork entailed both practical and methodological challenges, the focus here particularly concerns research relationships, more specifically the building of those relationships, access to the field and the constant renegotiation of both. By adopting a reflexive approach, this chapter seeks to explore how reflexivity can feed into method and practice and hopes to advance discussions on reflexive methodologies in criminological research, whilst also offering some concrete accounts of how to ‘be’ reflexive.

Research Approach and Choices

As with almost all methodological choices, there is a tension between getting rich and valid material on the one hand, and scale and representativeness of data on the other. Following a broadly ‘qualitative’ strategy, this research engaged in several methods of analysis, including observation and informal interviews which when used in conjunction, can serve to provide a holistic and inclusive description of cultural membership (Lindlof, 1995). Such methods (primarily semi-structured interviews) were chosen, as the experience of these potential ‘communities of victims’ had not been researched previously (and rarely acknowledged in the existing literature). The aim was therefore to concentrate on the private discourse of individuals involved
through an exploration of ‘victims’ as a collective identity. This choice of method would further our knowledge and understanding of ‘victims’ rather than an appreciation through the extrapolation of theories, arguments and politics based on taken for granted assumptions about a transient concept. As Stanley and Wise have suggested, ‘the best way to find out about people’s lives is for people to give their own analytical accounts of their own experiences’ (1983: 167).

With reference to the context of the research approach and methods chosen, I am drawn to the view that such qualitative research is partly autobiographical (Liebling, 1999; Jewkes, 2012), reflecting the researcher’s personality and psyche as well as those of the respondents participating in the interpretative dialogue. As Jennifer Hunt insightfully notes, ‘fieldwork is in part, the discovery of the self through the detour of the other’ (1989: 42). There is no doubt that the research process is a complex enterprise; in attempts to understand the role of the researcher within feminist perspectives for example, Ann Oakley has emphasised that drawing on and theorizing about one’s personal experience can be valuable to the research process (1981). In some areas of criminology, too, there has been a growing recognition that the research process must be an inherently personal, political and partial endeavour (Ferrell, 1998). Thus, it is suggested that the self is always present and affects every aspect of the research process from the choice of project to the presentation of ‘findings’ whether acknowledged or not (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Issues of reflexivity and reflection are an extremely important part of research and researcher identities need to be made explicit throughout the research process.
For this doctoral research I settled on two primary research sites in the United Kingdom, Dunblane in Scotland and Soham in Cambridgeshire. The reasons for these particular sites were two fold. Firstly, both had experience of what has been termed a ‘signal crime’ (Innes, 2003) and the proposal was to explore whether these highly mediatized crime events had left a tainted legacy for the wider community, which had permeated the collective memory. Secondly, I was keen to give a comparative edge to the research. The inclusion of a more recent ‘victim community’ such as Soham, in contrast to Dunblane, where the serious crime in question is not quite so ‘new’ in the collective memory (although this can be a temporal state), would give an element of longevity and temporal analysis to the understanding of the subject, adding value and depth to the findings.

With any academic research it is vitally important to have practical access to the sample population, yet in some situations this can be difficult. The process of starting to build relationships begins before a researcher enters the field, but how does one go about obtaining that initial access? This of course takes some form of planning but spontaneity, evolution and organic growth also play their part.

**Approaching the Field, Building Relationships**

In what can be described as the ‘pre-research’ phase, I set about gathering as much relevant secondary data as I could on the proposed research sites and the serious crime events, including national and local newspaper articles and images covering the crime (for a separate media analysis of the crime events, see O’Leary 2012). My primary approach was to use this material to identify and locate potential contacts from within each community. At this point I did not have a firm idea of the size of the
intended sample but hoped that via these ‘primary definers’ (Hall et al., 1978), a networking system of recommendations would emerge, where the number of participants to the research would ‘snowball’. As others have illustrated, from these first contacts, information about the research disseminates and such projects can often develop their own momentum (Sharpe, 2000). My own research path was not quite as smooth, although I did manage to engage an initial contact at one location that effectively acted as my champion and sponsor. This individual did much to ensure that I was introduced and at least accepted in the first instance, by some others in the community and their recommendations no doubt helped to encourage more to participate in the research. However, this was not always the case and there were several instances when those who were recommended to me declined to take part in the study.

Gaining access is unpredictable; particularly where the research is seen as sensitive in nature, because as John Johnson (1975) argues the one thing needed to ensure successful access is a detailed theoretical understanding of the social organisation of the setting one is attempting to enter. In other words, ‘that which is most likely to secure access can only be gained once the researcher is actually inside the setting’ and has carried out the fieldwork (cited in Lee, 1993, 121). In addition I was careful not to address the issue of access as one that only takes place at the initial phase of entry to the research setting. Instead it is an on-going and implicit process, which needs to be continually renegotiated, often on a personal and one to one basis. Access had to be revisited not only each time I made a new contact, but also when revisiting those who had not previously responded or when returning to participants at a later date. Although physical access is a likely precondition of the social (Lee, 1993) the latter
should not be taken for granted and can remain problematic. The concept of access can be helpfully thought of as a journey where social access is the ‘process of ‘getting along’ through establishing a research role, building a rapport with participants and securing their trust’ (Noaks and Wincup, 2004, 63). Past experiences of research for participants (or in this case, previous experience of media attention, which they judged as one in the same) can often make group members cynical and they may assume the worst about an outsider (Lee, 1993). This was particularly resonant given the nature of this research subject and the intense media coverage of the serious crimes both at the time and subsequently. As a prospective outsider attempting to enter these communities I was acutely aware that I may be considered as part of that interest and assigned a negative ‘role’ on that basis.

Entering the Field, Accessing a Sensitive Community

During the pre-research phase of information gathering, I initially travelled several times to the research sites to get a ‘feel’ for the place and the communities and to gather any background and local community information that I felt would be instructive. This also gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the geography and the physical space of the places where I would be spending so much time. I spoke to people in the local shops, in the pubs and chatted to residents on the street about everyday issues, passing the time of day, but not talking about my research. At the time I did not consider these actions as research in the formal sense, yet on reflection in addition to informal information gathering I was clearly ‘getting my face known’ and attempting to move some way from my assumed identified position as a complete ‘outsider’ or someone whose interest came with dubious intentions. From some of that information and together with the newspaper articles
collated for the media analysis I was able to identify names of some in the community to approach to partake in this study. Initial contact was by letter, explaining the aims and process of the research, as well as details and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality (issues which had become highly visible in both sites during this pre-research process). From these preliminary contacts and after further communications, a handful of interviews were arranged with participants at the two sites. At the end of each of these interviews and where appropriate, each participant was asked if they felt they could recommend anyone else in the community to take part in the research. The overall response rate to these requests for participation was not high and while the numbers of community members who participated did reach the target set (39 in total), there were several within the community who declined to take part in the research study before having a fully informed understanding of the details of the research aims and process. This in itself gives an interesting indication of the level of emotion and stigma attached to the locality and members of the community at a collective level.

**Keeping the Gate Open: Negotiating Relationships**

Researching in and around serious and high profile crimes can be an extremely sensitive and emotional activity. Such research requires consideration of the socio-political and cultural context within which the project is undertaken and received. Ethical practices should permeate all stages of the research process and by reflecting on potential problems that may occur, methods of how to minimise the effect on research participants can be devised.

*Informed Consent and Confidentiality*
Informed consent can be viewed as the linchpin of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the point in the research process at which ethical considerations are brought definitively to the foreground. The principle of informed consent is deeply embedded in professional codes of practice and achieving it is generally promoted as a fundamental guiding principle for an ethically informed approach to social science research. Informed consent can be described as research conducted in such a way that participants have ‘a complete understanding, at all times, of what the research is about and the implications for themselves in being involved’ (Noaks and Wincup, 2004, 45). Such transparency of approach is commendable but often difficult to achieve in some practical situations, as it may discourage certain potential participants willingness to reveal sensitive information. At times the researcher has to balance the competing questions of consent and validity (Jupp et al., 2000). However, part of the rapport and trust that a qualitative researcher aims to build with participants involves privacy and confidentiality; something which participants need to be aware of and understand from the outset of the fieldwork. In addition it was apparent during this research that, as with the issue of access, on-going consent should not automatically be assumed. Informed consent also implies the right to discontinue participation, to withdraw consent, even once the research is underway and where relevant has to be renegotiated throughout the various stages of the fieldwork.

The ethical approach adopted with my own research participants in this case was to offer them assurances regarding confidentiality and although this was less important for some than others, the default position of anonymity. This of course was not possible when considering the community more generally and the notion of place.
Research, which is grounded in a sense of place, cannot credibly anonymise place names (Loader et al., 1998). Some community members and research participants had understandable concerns about how the image of their community may be negatively affected by the research attention. However, they also clearly understood that by their very nature, these were locations where extremely high profile crimes had taken place and as such, are already likely to have negative connotations for wider audiences. Therefore, the inability to disguise the location of the research sites was explained fully to the participants in terms meaningful to them and an understanding of this issue and its implications was agreed before any data collection took place.

The process of research can be an emotionally intense experience for any researcher and participant. When researching in a community, the collective element can be equally significant. Researchers will often need to be aware of and navigate community biases and partisanships. Resonance is felt here with Lynn Hancock’s writings on conducting research in high crime communities where she calls for researchers to be ‘mindful of the sensibilities that exist in a community and consider their implications’ (2000: 378). Not only then does research conducted within a community need to be conscious of the attitudes to the research, but also aware of neighbourhood collectives and sensitive to how they may cut across the willingness of some to be involved in the research or not. This was certainly an important dimension of my own research, as I often had requests from participants and potential participants enquiring as to who else had contributed and what their thoughts had been. There was a distinct concern from some to know whether they were ‘on’ or ‘off’ message with others who had participated in the research and almost all were at pains to insist they were not speaking on behalf of the community as a whole. I found
the situation difficult when respondents enquired in this way but strict notions of anonymity and confidentiality had been promised and were adhered to at all times. I dealt with this by talking in general terms of the ‘many people from different sections of the community who had kindly agreed to participate’. Given the nature of community relations at one of the research sites in particular, confidentiality and anonymity from other members of their wider community was a particularly important issue. Whilst it was reiterated throughout the research process and to all participants that I was simply interested in their thoughts and experiences as individuals as part of a community, it transpired that others had fallen foul of this before with interviews given to the media and it had become almost a local ‘taboo’ to be talking about community issues, as a spokesperson for, or on behalf of the community.

Collective Sensibilities, Emotions and Neutrality

Defining what constitutes ‘sensitive’ research is not as straightforward as it sounds. A relatively broad and safe definition may be to say that a research topic is sensitive if it involves potential cost or harm to those who are or who have been involved; harm or cost that goes beyond the incidental or merely onerous (Lee, 1993). Of course, it should be recognised that there are different ideas of harm for different people and at different stages of the process. With regard to this research, I was reminded of what can be described as the ‘messy realities’ of social research. This research project explores a subject matter that is complex and emotional in nature for many in the community, whether participating in the research directly or not. As such, as the researcher I had to be constantly aware of the sensitivity of the situation with specific regard to issues of intrusion and vulnerability; it is particularly important to be aware
that research about emotional and sensitive issues may bring forward vulnerable people as others have suggested (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Finch, 1984). Paying attention to the sensitivity of the research and the issue of intrusion in particular, I aimed to reduce the extent that this may have been a significant factor for my participants by careful consideration throughout the research process of methods, the nature, breadth and depth of the questions, the impingement on the time of those involved and by warning participants of the potential sensitive nature of the content.

Staying neutral when conducting research of an emotional nature is also difficult. In ‘Whose side are we on?’ Howard Becker (1967) firmly believes that qualitative research can never be totally value free. Whilst ethics is undoubtedly a vital component of robust research, Becker suggests that in order to produce authentic and quality data one must take sides, particularly if researching a ‘powerless’ or subordinate group. Due to the individual and ‘hands on’ nature of much qualitative research there is little chance that the researcher will not have some sympathy and possible attachments to the group being researched. This may put in jeopardy the ‘value free’ stance attempted by the researcher to the extent that Becker (1967) firmly believes that all research is unavoidably contaminated by the researcher’s beliefs. Although individual biases and values can be minimised, they cannot be completely eradicated. Being sympathetic and maybe even taking sides, could certainly distort the data to a degree but it does not make it unusable. Historically the qualitative researcher or ethnographer invariably leaves ones individual mark on the data collection process. This has certainly been my own experience.

Reflections on Research Relations
Qualitative research takes place in a vast variety of situations and there is much variation within each type of setting that is relevant and has bearing on the nature of relationships that are possible with the participants in these settings. As such, generalizations when discussing relations in the field are necessarily subject to multiple exceptions. Therefore this account can only be a discussion of the methodological and practical considerations as they relate directly to this doctoral research study.

My research experience leads me to believe that researcher identity and status are important and complex issues and encountering suspicion about a researcher’s presence in the field is not uncommon. I am aware that my initial attempts to enter the field at both sites were sometimes thwarted or certainly made more difficult because of the doubt of some community members as to my true intentions. Due to the nature of the research subject and my interest in the role of the media in the representations of community, many potential respondents were suspicious that I was in fact part of the media myself. My greatest (and on-going) hurdle in this respect was to convince participants of my interests in their own views and day-to-day experiences rather than the more media driven, voyeuristic elements of the crime itself. In this regard I worked extremely hard throughout the research process and through the fieldwork stage in particular, to encourage the view that my interest in their community and these issues was intellectual in nature and more importantly, genuine.

These discussions have highlighted many elements to consider of a practical and emotional nature when approaching, accessing and negotiating the field. Emotional involvement and experience can certainly play a part in the formulation of knowledge.
Although not technically essential to the research process, the ability to draw on one’s own experience and resources can allow connections to be made and rapport to be developed between researchers and researched at a crucial early stage of the fieldwork. In this way the role of the researcher in the research process as a whole, including generating the data collected must be recognised (Hammersley, 1992).

There is a vast amount of literature on the role of the researcher and one of the most pertinent themes to emanate is that establishing a research role takes time and one needs to adopt different roles throughout the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). For these reasons and in order to be accepted, researchers need to be adaptable in how they manage their role (Goffman, 1963) within the fieldwork setting. In my own experience this role adjustment was not an overt or conscious decision, rather a critical awareness of the level of sensitivity that was needed to manage what were often acute relations in the field.

Reflexivity in Method and Practice

There is always the risk of the researcher altering what is said or done in a specific situation by her very presence (Jewkes, 2002). Why is it important for some researchers to be reflexive, to discuss and analyse research methods and reasons for their use, when for others it is simply not an issue? Many significant and influential studies, even those employing ethnographic methods, have been written and published with very little discussion in this area. Often elements of context have not informed a substantial part of the text in accounts of research. Where they have been provided, they are sometimes tucked away in a short appendix or are often highly generalised accounts. Although as Davies (2000) notes, within more recent mainstream criminological publications, descriptive accounts of research processes
have become more prominent and transparent, still many empirical accounts only pay lip service to issues of reflexivity. Whilst factually describing methods employed, there is often little description or discussion of the more personal reasons for, or elements of, the research. This does not allow the audiences to consider the research process or project in its entirety. With no reflexive account there is nothing of the authors personality or identity within, no recognition of self. This leaves the audience in a weakened position as it becomes more difficult to analyse and consider the representativeness and validity of the research process and findings without this information. Whether these are key issues for all is a decision for the individual researcher, but a reflexive awareness of the many influences on data collection, presentation and of the research process as a whole, is crucial to my mind. Using reflexivity in this way, we can claim to be more aware of the factors affecting and underpinning the investigation of social phenomena. This is all part of the learning process of social research (Ransome, 2013).

**Conclusion**

This discussion has presented a reflexive insight into the practical process of conducting research on a sensitive issue at a community level. Its contribution to the discussion of reflexivity in criminological research foregrounds the primacy of emotion and sensitivity within the research process, particularly at a community level. Such discussions must do more than fulfil the requirements of a ‘methods’ section or chapter of a research project; self-awareness and emotion are the conduits to understanding the process of ‘doing’ research. This chapter has also detailed the reflexive experiences of exploring a previously un-researched and relatively powerless group. These groups have experienced victimisation in the wake of a
serious and high profile crime but as a collective, have not had their voices heard. As such this work is able to challenge the more public, stereotypical and simplistic discourses of those who are ‘recognised’ as victims. The doctoral research on which this chapter is based owes a clear debt to the work of Erving Goffman (1961, 1963) concerning stigma and spoiled identity and the classic works of Howard Becker (1963, 1967) regarding labelling and neutrality in social research. These formative studies of crime and deviance are refracted in another direction by examining the impact of issues of identity, stigma and social reaction through a collective or community lens.

The power of qualitative research is in showing how there are alternative explanations for any outcome, and also that there can be many different outcomes. This diversity and variation is not a shortcoming, but rather a strength. With that in mind I do not suggest that this work is representative of all who are part of a physical community in the aftermath of a serious and high profile crime, nor is it necessarily indicative of others experiences of qualitative research with emotional communities. I do hope however, that it does have value in explanatory terms and that it may be relevant to other researchers who find themselves in similar situations.

References


Piacentini, L. (2013) ‘Handle with Care: New and Established Methodologies in Prison Research’ (last consulted 26 August 2013). Available at SSRN:

http://ssrn.com/abstract=2240953
