Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Perplexing positions: On the researcher’s role and ethics in the field

Camille, Claes; De Kimpe, Sofie; Dumortier, Els

Published in:
European Journal of Policing Studies

Publication date:
2017

Document Version:
Final published version

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Camille, C., De Kimpe, S., & Dumortier, E. (2017). Perplexing positions: On the researcher’s role and ethics in the field. *European Journal of Policing Studies*, *5*(1), 133-158.

Copyright
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, without the prior written permission of the author(s) or other rights holders to whom publication rights have been transferred, unless permitted by a license attached to the publication (a Creative Commons license or other), or unless exceptions to copyright law apply.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document infringes your copyright or other rights, please contact openaccess@vub.be, with details of the nature of the infringement. We will investigate the claim and if justified, we will take the appropriate steps.

Download date: 23. Feb. 2024

Perplexing Positions: The researcher's role and ethics in the field

Camille Claeys[1], Sofie De Kimpe[2] and Els Dumortier[3]

Abstract

While undertaking qualitative research, researchers often experience issues with an emotional or ethical charge. This backstage reality of the research process is not often discussed in public. In this article, we argue that (ethical) research inheres an important learning process. Research errors – in this article 'dilemmas' - should be revealed to the academic world rather than swept under the carpet. Researchers should be encouraged to describe and reflect on these dilemmas as it helps them to become more aware of what they are doing when they are in the thick of their research. Using this (ethical) reflexivity, our article examines real ethical dilemmas encountered in the field by a junior PhD researcher. In doing so, more methodological awareness was created and the research quality was increased. We hope this ethical reflexive exercise will inspire other researchers and contribute as such to the greater body of methodological knowledge.

Key words : Police interrogations, juveniles, ethnography, ethical issues, methodological issues

Introduction: the need for ethical reflexivity and acknowledging a researcher's mistakes

While undertaking qualitative research, researchers often experience involvement issues with an emotional or ethical charge. These involvement issues (related to participating, distancing, etc.) arise when the researcher interacts with research participants on a personal level. For instance, the boundaries between the researcher and the participants become blurred (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007), sometimes resulting in the loss of the researchers' role. Alternatively, the intruding character of qualitative research – namely observing what people say and do, and the consequential direct access to their lives – creates dilemmas regarding confidentiality and other aspects relating to the personal relationship with participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). All along, the researcher will be confronted with conflicting expectations and loyalties, which can be seen as effects of the differences between two ‘worlds’– academia and the field (ten Have, 2004). That backstage reality of the research process is not often discussed publicly. However, according to many authors; such as May (1993), Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) and Worley, Worley, and Wood (2016) qualitative researchers should report issues, for instance ethical issues, encountered in their studies (to ensure discussion, analysis, and eventually prevention of future mistakes) instead of bracketing them which is a partial and less productive mode of conducting research. Jemielniak and Kostera (2010) especially assert that analysis of research ‘failures’ has been much less developed in the discourse of ethnographic methods. By revealing research errors they argue that ethnographers can better position themselves as outsiders and handle ambiguity and failure with more insight. Namely, the disclosure of dilemmas and research errors strengthen and clarify the position and role of the researcher’s intervention in the research field. Moreover, if researchers share their experiences, they make their work behind the scenes more transparent, which is valuable for the research community at large: “*understanding our peers’ slips is a tremendous help in reconceptualising our own”* (Jemielniak & Kostera, 2010, p. 336). Furthermore, calling attention to the transparency of the research process, revealing errors and clarifying the decisions made to solve the problems at stake, only increases the quality of the research process and external reliability of research data. Doing ethnographic research is a trial and error process, where knowledge is gleaned from successes and failures, which demands a constant methodological awareness from the researcher concerning his/her role and position in the research field as well as the quality of the research data (gathering). Clarifying and describing mistakes can contribute to the methodological awareness that it demands in addition to fostering reflexivity. Research failures highlight the key insight that reflexivity, as a methodology, is needed: it aids in furthering awareness of how we ‘do’ criminological research and how to position ourselves and our methodological practices within the field of criminology (Lumsden & Winter, 2014).

---

[1] Camille Claeys is currently conducting a PhD on the topic of police interrogations of juvenile suspects at the Department of Criminology of the VUB, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Els Dumortier and Prof. Dr. Sofie De Kimpe. She holds a Master degree in law and received the Jura Falconis price for her master thesis "The rights of minors with regard to their personality file: Legal guarantees and confidentiality of the personality file in the context of transfer". She currently works on a project funded by the Flemish Fund of (fundamental) Scientific Research (corresp: Camille.claeys@vub.ac.be).

[2] Prof. Dr. Sofie De Kimpe holds a Master degree in political science, criminology and has a PhD in criminology. She teaches subjects on policing and criminological methodology at the department of Criminology of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). She worked as an academic expert for the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Belgian Federal police, managing a project 'police, a learning organization'. In 2013 she returned to the VUB as a full time member of the Crime & Society Research group. She is research-coordinator of the Strategic Research Program "Crossing Borders: crime, culture and control". She is member of different editorial boards. Currently she supervises Phd theses and research projects on police interrogations of young suspects, the impact of deontology education on police officers and socialization processes in police culture. She is also founding member and member of the steering group of the ESC Working Group on Policing.

[3] Prof. Dr. Els Dumortier holds a master's degree in law and in criminology and she obtained her PhD in Criminology. She is professor in "youth law", "youth criminology", "constitutional criminal law" and in "methods of criminological research" at the Faculty of Law and Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium). Her research specifically focuses on questions concerning youth justice (practices) and children's rights both in contemporary times and in the past (20th century). Currently, Els Dumortier is particularly interested in police interrogations of juvenile offenders, in judicial trajectories and the impact of juvenile justice interventions and in child victimology. She participates in several national and international scientific networks in the domain of youth justice (Dutch, English and French speaking), both contemporary focused and historical.

In this article, research errors or failures are defined as *dilemmas.* They refer to the tension in which the researcher is tied down in making the right choices during fieldwork without devaluating the quality of the research data. First, by reflecting on these dilemmas and the choices made, the goal is to increase the methodological awareness concerning our research process and enhance its external reliability. Although reflexivity is a familiar concept in the qualitative tradition, it is only over the last few decades that it is seen as an ethical notion (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Using this ethical reflexivity, one may wonder: how do ethical principles reconcile with research aims? Second, by giving real encountered dilemmas ethical (reflexive) consideration, we hope to inspire other researchers with our gained methodological insight and contribute as such to the body of methodological knowledge, available for future research.

1. The research project, the methods and the researcher

The research project aims at discovering how juveniles (suspected of having infringed the criminal law) are being interrogated by police officers in Belgium. Police interrogations are often the starting point of criminal procedures against juvenile suspects. Research conducted in the US suggests that the various manipulative and potentially coercive techniques police use to get suspects to incriminate themselves have important consequences when used on juveniles (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Feld, 2013). Scientific insights into the biopsychosocial aspects and developmental immaturity of children and adolescents (Bishop & Farber, 2007; Gudjonsson, 2010) sustains the acknowledgment that juveniles are vulnerable in the interrogation room. However, empirical research on police interrogations of juvenile offenders remains scarce. In Belgium this is also the case, as there has been very little empirical research on the practices of police interrogations with juveniles (see for instance Vanderhallen et al. (2016)). As a consequence, there is insufficient scientific knowledge on how these interrogations are conducted in daily police practice. For the above-mentioned reasons, the project aims to shed light on the topic via rich descriptive accounts of human cultural and social life *in situ*. To do this, we used participant observation as a method of data collection. For this method, the researcher in the field, Camille Claeys, took part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life (*in casu* the interrogations with juveniles) through the observation of events in their natural contexts. Because of the frequency of her visits to the sites of data collection and the fact that she did not 'live' with her participants nor participated fully in their activities, we feel our approach should be described as 'quasi-ethnographic' rather than as pure ethnography.[4]

Systematically describing the culture and activities of the studied social group leads to a deep understanding of a particular topic or situation (the interrogations) through the meanings ascribed to it by the individuals who live and experience it (McKechnie, 2008; McNeill & Chapman, 2005). In order to comprehend the context of the interrogations and the other facets of their job, a certain amount of time was spent with the interrogators. For example, the researcher accompanied them during inspection of juvenile house arrests, went along with them to pick-up juveniles at their homes or at youth detention centres and kept them company during the dull hours of waiting in the police station (for intervention calls or the arrival of juveniles). Being more specifically a participant-as-observer[5], she used a variety of methods including direct observation of their behaviour, informal conversations, formal interviewing, document analysis, etc. (McKechnie, 2008).

The aim was to gain insight into 'interrogation' as a component of police investigation, using the sensitising concept of 'children's rights.'[6] Although the research methods (observing, describing and the goal of understanding social issues) are shared with the field of anthropology and sociology, the theoretical orientation is chiefly criminological and judicial. The researcher's legal background was useful for the judicial aspect of the research but she was absolutely unacquainted with ethnography and the intricacies of its research methods, which obliged her to acclimate to the methods and disciplinary perspectives of the field of criminology. Moreover, she was also very young (24 years old) when making her first steps into the field. Consequently, this led to specific challenges such as, a lack of experience. However, she took advantage of that and displayed the naive enthusiasm that is typical of new researchers and which is a basic quality for successful fieldwork according to Punch (1989a) because (among others) the researcher is perceived as non-threatening and elicits sympathy (Punch, 1986). This went hand in hand with (consciously) naive questions to request explanations of banal matters, thus accumulating information concerning the research participants' accounts and viewpoints

---

[4] Ethnography is a long process that involves the ethnographer participating in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, requiring him or her to 'live' with the people being studied in order to establish something of importance about a whole human culture. The length of time spent gathering the data took place over two academics year but was not sustained: visits to the sites were intermittent throughout the period. Also, the researcher did not participate fully in the police activities and was mainly an observer. For a comparison, see (Murtagh, 2007).

[5] Researchers adopt roles that vary along a continuum of participation ranging from complete observer (no participation), through participant-as-observer (more observer than participant) and observer-as-participant (more participant than observer) to complete participant.

[6] *"Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look"* (Bowen, 2006).

(Corbetta, 2003).[7] In total, the researcher spent more than 400 hours in the field.[8] However, she did not, in the strict anthropological sense, share in all the experiences of her participants (such as doing interrogations for instance). Consequently, her immersion was relatively shallow, which is why it is described as an ethnographically inspired approach (quasi-ethnography).

Because of the fear of 'contaminating' her empirical observations with preconceived notions from literature, she decided to undertake her fieldwork in an 'inductive manner' an approach that is convenient for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the literature study that preceded the fieldwork was quite limited. The wish to depart from the observations of the reality and the stories of the police interrogators was fed by the belief that in this way, she would be socialised in the setting in a way similar to the socialization of a 'new colleague'. In this way, being socialised in this similar fashion would allow her to come nearer to them (and thus to their way of thinking) (ten Have, 2004). "*Indeed, qualitative research (…) does not start with hypotheses or preconceived notions. Instead, in accordance with its inductive nature, it involves the researcher's attempts to discover, understand, and interpret what is happening in the research context"* (Bowen, 2006, p. 3).

Given the researcher's academic (judicial) education, she was not familiar with the ethical aspects of observation research and just as Decorte (2010), she had to experience them first-hand. During the research process, she experienced how ethical decision-making is profoundly interweaved with the researchers' role and her personal sense of integrity.

2. A troubling researcher's role: different ethical dimensions

Among social scientists, criminologists are particularly likely to face significant ethical issues and this is for several reasons. In this project for instance, the police setting was (inherently) unpredictable, ambivalent, and the subject matter quite sensitive. As we will illustrate further, the fieldwork was ethically ambiguous throughout different stages of the research process. The moral dilemmas or concerns (of different ethical dimensions) were relatively minor but seem methodologically important and interesting enough to recount. They led to feelings of discomfort, which means they necessitated a critical reflexive exercise to re-evaluate the researchers attitude, and to learn from these experiences. Considered relevant to this exercise, we will recount some of the researchers' slip-ups to reflect on both her role and the ethical aspects that come forth. The reflexive exercise falls into two main methodological topics: informing participants and participant-as observer issues. Before these topics, the dilemmas' different ethical dimensions will be discussed.

'Ethics' are now inherently part of our modern scientific era, as the establishment of ethical committees, protocols and codes of ethics demonstrate (van de Bunt, 2015). But there are very different (philosophical) approaches to the topic which means that there is definitional confusion.
To explain the term ethics, first, a distinction should be made between ethics as a *subject matter* and ethics as *a field of study* (of moral philosophy) (Resnik, 2010). As a subject matter, ethics refer to standards of conduct (or social norms) that prescribe appropriate behaviour and virtuous living in human philosophy (Preissle, 2008; Resnik, 2010). As a field of study, ethics is a normative discipline

---

[7] For other background characteristics of the researcher that influenced the data-gathering, see our previous publication (Claeys, Dumortier, & De Kimpe, 2015).

[8] Ethnography requires insertion into the natural setting of the social group being studied for long periods of time (Fetterman, 2008; McNeill & Chapman, 2005).

according to which ethicists (or moral philosophers) study standards of conduct, criticising and evaluating them[9]. In this sense, the main goals of this discipline are prescriptive and evaluative (rather than descriptive and explanatory) (Pojman, 1995 in Resnik, 2010).

A second difference is between ethics and its related construct, *morality*. In Europe, both terms are conventionally viewed in binary terms such as right and wrong, good and bad, and doing the right thing and avoiding wrong actions (Barry, 1985, in Pollock, 2014; Preissle, 2008; Sherman, 1981, in Pollock, 2014)[10]. Morality consists of a society's most general principles. It refers to standards of behaviour or what is otherwise judged as good conduct (Pollock, 2014; Resnik, 2010). Moral principles have a distinct action-guiding aspect and involve what ought to be: What is the right thing to do in this situation? (Pojman, 2012). They apply to all people in society regardless of their professional or institutional roles, while ethics are not general standards of conduct but the standards of a particular profession, occupation, institution, or group within society (consequently we speak of 'professional ethics', 'research ethics', etc.) (Resnik, 2010). More commonly, ethics is used as an adjective ('(un)ethical') to refer to behaviours relating to that profession, while 'moral' is used as an adjective to describe a person's actions in other spheres of life (Pollock, 2014). In this paper, the 'moral dilemmas' must be understood as situations in which norms and values are at stake and where a choice had to be made between potential alternatives, while there were good arguments for each of these alternatives (Karssing, 2001 in Wouters et al., 2014).

When we talk about ethics in fieldwork, the discussions in methodological handbooks often concern informed consent, privacy, protecting participants from harm, etc. (e.g. Caulfield & Hill, 2014; Hagan, 2005; Matthews & Ross, 2010). These topics are termed 'procedural ethics' by Guillenmin and Gillam (2004) and still dominate the debate (Allmark et al., 2009; Mortelmans, 2013). But the rules of procedural ethics are relative, which implies we should take the situational context into account (Mortelmans, 2013). Consequently, other dimensions of ethics have been delineated such as 'situational ethics,' 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and 'relational ethics' (Ellis, 2007).

The term 'situational ethics' refers to the numerous situational factors associated with an ethical dilemma (Robertson et al., 2002). The term 'relational ethics' *"…situates ethical action explicitly in relationship. If ethics is about how we should live, then it is essentially about how we should live together… it demands attentiveness and responsiveness to our commitments to one another* (Austin, 2008, p. 749). These dimensions and the potential problems they raise for the researcher, in respect to the various roles that must often be performed, (Hagan, 2005) are much less discussed. Still, they are very present in police ethnography as will be exposed further on. Marcus' argument, that there is a need to explore the ethical dimensions of ethnographic research (Marcus, 1998) therefore seems still applicable.

---

[9] In contrast to social scientists who offer descriptive and explanatory accounts of standards of conduct (Rest, 1986 in Resnik, 2010).

[10] *"However ethics is defined, human societies everywhere have ideas about what is appropriate conduct and how to live an exemplary or virtuous life. When these are codified into rules enforced by authority, they are considered to be laws. (…) The development of scholarship on ethics in the West since the Enlightenment reflects, in some respects, an effort to detach supernatural arguments from moral theories and ethical decision making and to focus ethical thought on the conduct of human relationships and on individual well-being"* (Preissle, 2008).

3. Informing participants

3.1 Informed consent: what do you tell, and how do you tell it?

Most ethical codes for research demand that, other than in exceptional circumstances, participants agree to the research before it commences (Israel & Hay, 2008). This principle, called *informed consent*, is a key principle when conducting scientific research and can lead to many challenges in qualitative research. According to this principle, researchers are obliged to provide the participants with proper information about the research, so that they are well-informed and can make a conscious choice whether to participate or not (Decorte & Zaitch, 2010). The person's voluntariness in deciding and their capacity to understand is an important characteristic of informed consent. Therefore, participants must be provided with information about the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and possible outcomes of the research, including whether as well as how the research results might be disseminated (Israel & Hay, 2008). Consequently, researchers must be frank about their task, explaining what they plan to study and how they plan to study it (Fetterman, 2008). According to some authors, participants should not be deceived about significant aspects of the research that would affect their willingness to participate such as discomfort or unpleasant emotional experiences. Deceptive techniques can only be used when the researcher has determined that their use will not be harmful to participants (Mortelmans, 2013). Some go even further and state that, when doing participant observation, full disclosure of the purpose of the study is required because false or partial explanations are too risky and add unnecessary stress (Patton, 1990). Given the constraints under which qualitative research is often carried out, many researchers (Fine, 1993; Goode, 1996; Pruvost, 2007) believe this is not always possible because *"there are issues about what being informed amounts to"* (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Berreman (2012, p. 163) for instance believes *"While I think it practical and ethically sound for the ethnographer to make known his intention to learn about the way of life of the people he plans to study, I believe it to be ethically unnecessary and methodologically unsound to make known his specific hypotheses, and in many cases even his areas of interest. To take his informants into his confidence regarding these may well preclude the possibility of acquiring much information essential to the main goal of understanding their way of life".* As they are applied in dynamic situations, principles contained in methodological textbooks or professional codes of conduct will often be stretched and perhaps distorted (Rowe, 2007).

In our research project, the way we[11] obtained our participants' informed consent illustrates this well. Hereby, it is important to repeat that our research took place in a police setting. Not only are police officers very suspicious towards scientific researchers, it is also difficult to gain their trust as an 'outsider' when entering the field. After receiving a research permission of the chief constable ("*korpschef")* and the general prosecutor ("*procureur des Konings"*), we presented our project to the different gatekeepers. In this, one of our 'sensitising concepts' in the research - namely *children's rights* - was not mentioned as such. This omission was made consciously for two reasons: firstly, we wanted to avoid that the conceptualisation and terminology of the researcher would be introduced in the conversations with the police officers and thus lead to the well-known phenomenon of social desirability[12]. Introducing this concept might have biased the research data as police officers, being aware of our search for children's rights, would have paid special attention towards these rights; ex.

---

[11] The researcher presented the research project with her supervisors.

[12] Respondents can be unwilling to report accurately on sensitive topics for ego-defensive or impression management reasons (Fischer, 1993). However, performing continually in front of the ethnographer (fooling him/her) is difficult over time (Schwartz, 1993).

by giving more than usual attention to the use of 'child friendly' language. Additionally, the prior aim of the field study was to observe the interrogation of juveniles and not to evaluate the way police officers practice children's rights. Secondly, research subjects in powerful positions, such as police, often have their own ideas and agendas about how knowledge should be constructed, disseminated and applied in the 'real world' (Lumsden & Winter, 2014). Children's rights and the relationship between juvenile suspects and police officers are sensitive topics in Belgium (Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2012). As the concept can be at odds with the gatekeepers' hidden agendas, ideologies and cultures, we feared this could compromise access or involve the risk of studying an artefact rather than the normal behaviour or discourse of the participants. Referring to this concept would indeed involve the risk of the police officers believing we were going to 'control' them as well as their respect (or not) for children's rights. Strategically adjusting our communication in this way seemed prudent as the researcher often heard the police inspectors say, *"suspects already have enough rights"* or "*we always feel controlled, when will somebody listen to our side of the story?"*

Not stressing all the aspects of the research object (not being totally open with the participants) can burden the researcher with feelings of guilt and concern related to the fear of potentially spoiling the field for future researchers. It might be that participants feel they have been betrayed in their expectations and refuse any further cooperation with scientific research. This is why gaining trust and openness with the research participants can be a pitfall. However, it seemed the only way of gaining meaningful and undistorted data and as Falcone (2010, p. 265) notes, "*we are almost always harming someone's agenda."* We shade the truth to increase the likelihood of acceptance and yes, we place our ease before that of our informants to avoid the findings being compromised (Fine, 1993). For solace, we turned to the precaution of providing complete anonymity (Crow et al., 2006; O'Gorman & Vander Laenen, 2010). Also, the concept of children's rights was carefully introduced (in a subtle way) in the last interviews.

Even if consent is gained initially, it must be managed and negotiated in an ongoing manner throughout the course of a research project, by considering participants' responses, answering their questions, etc. (Ellis, 2007; Iphofen, 2015; Miller & Boulton, 2008). We will illustrate how difficult this can be in the following section. The question 'how (much) do you inform' becomes 'what can you do, after having informed participants in a way you judged most appropriate, to counter the possible feelings of discomfort that would result from the way in which consent was obtained'? According to many researchers, these concerns can be counterbalanced by informing the participants indirectly and *later on* in the research process. An option would be to engage in a 'mutually empowering relationship' by giving something back to the participants, diminishing in this way the instrumental character of the research relationship (Crow et al., 2006). In our project, we could do this by providing the concerned Youth Units a letter of rights that is written in juvenile-friendly language[13]. In such a relationship lies the possibility of reciprocity and respect for the participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), the substrates of relational ethics (Mortelmans, 2013). Furthermore, we will organise a seminar with the research respondents wherein we will present and discuss the research results. In this, anxiety and suspicion about research results and their outcome can be counter discoursed.

In summary, disclosure of the research intentions and thereby informing the research subjects about the aim of the research should always be thoroughly balanced. The balance must be between respecting the respondents and their right to be fully aware of their involvement on the one hand and the quality of the data on the other.

---

[13] The Youth Units are actually using a standardized letter of rights that is criticized for not being specifically adapted to juvenile suspects (Penne et al., 2012).

3.2 Participant questions: “to lie or not to lie?”

When we are confronted with a moral dilemma, we will always trespass certain values or fail to meet the interests of the specific stakeholders (Wouters et al., 2014). The following example narrates how the researcher initially lied to a participant because of a fear of losing his trust and his will to further collaborate. Making decisions incongruent with their sense of integrity (for instance lying) can leave researchers with an “*ethical hangover*” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, p. 343). After thinking it through, she decided the truth would – on the contrary – better serve the preservation of trust, even if telling the truth contained the risk to provoke the participant’s anger. This example illustrates that dealing with the trust of your participants -when you have managed to obtain a good ‘working relationship’- is not always easy.

> Interrogator Enrique has just interrogated a fourteen-year-old boy who got on his nerves during the conversation. He yelled at the boy during the interrogation and did a lot of sarcastic remarks, even an offending remark. When the boy has left, the interrogator starts a conversation with me. Enrique: *«Well, I hope you won’t judge me now. Usually I’m a bit more “farce”*[14] *with the suspects, but here really… I hope you won’t put my remarks in your report. »* Me: *« No. What do you mean with “farce”? »* I don’t dare to tell Enrique I’ve definitely put his irony, sarcasm, yelling and offending remark in the report, so I try to change the subject by asking more about the word *“farce”*. I’m afraid he’ll be angry and won’t do the second interview with me. Minutes later I wonder if I should not have been honest and explain him it’s my job to try to sketch the interrogations as realistically as possible. I don’t feel comfortable now, having lied to him.[15]
>
> (Three days later)
> Enrique says - when we are alone in the room - : *« You know, you don’t have to worry if some people have been more closed with you during your stay here”.* Me: *« Oh but I don’t worry. In fact I understand, I put myself in their place. I think I wouldn’t like it either if someone came to observe me working and would listen to everything I say. But well, that’s my job. »*
> Enrique *: « Yeah…but I hope you won’t put everything I said in your thing. You’ve seen I’m quite atypical. My colleagues are much more serious during their interrogations…»* I take the chance to try to dissipate my discomfort concerning this (because of his same remark on the 15th, after the interrogation).
> *“You know Enrique, I’m going to be honest with you. Your sarcasm and your irony, I’ve included it in my fieldnotes…I have to sketch a realistic image eh. It’s of no use if I describe interrogations, not taking up what is said ‘between the lines’… But that’s why everything is anonymised, and nobody will be able to trace things back to you while reading my report. I’m trying to take up the verbal exchange as well as corporal interaction, sarcastic remarks, humour, etc. because that’s what gives a realistic representation of the interrogations. And I do the same for the juveniles. I describe their attitude, their behaviour, so that the reader understands why a person reacts that way.* I hold my breath, curious about Enrique’s reaction. I see him think. Then, he says: *“anonymised eh…”*. Enrique is clearly a bit worried but seems to understand it, (I interpret his tone in that little phrase as acceptance). Me [smiling]: *“Yes”*.

---

[14] I kept the original word (in French). As the use of this specific word was strange in this context, with a translation the reader would not understand why I asked the police interrogator its meaning. In French, the word can have several meanings. In this case, the interrogator meant *« pleasant* or *kind ».*

[15] 15th of December 2015. Fieldnotes relating to a Youth Unit.

> I feel much better now that I’ve just been honest. It’s a small victory in my eyes.[16]

Even if the researcher had explained the interrogators in advance she would observe their behaviour during the interrogations and record this immediately as she was seeing or hearing it (they always saw or heard me typing notes), this participant clearly did not like the idea of everything he said during the interrogations being written up. Some would probably see a problem of “process consent” here, as you should – according to that principle – check at each stage whether your participants still want to continue or not with participating (Ellis, 2007). But as the respondent made his remark only at the end of the fieldwork, when the data were already gathered (which cost a lot of energy), the researcher was initially inclined to ignore his discomfort. What’s more, she feared his reaction to the announcement that she would ignore his hope (to have the spicy remarks be left out). If he had expressed his apprehension in an earlier stage, she would probably also have wondered whether telling him the truth could have consequences regarding social desirability or whether she would be refused access to future interrogations, which would be worse. With these fieldnote excerpts we want to illustrate two things.

To begin with, they illustrate how difficult it is for the researcher to react adequately on the spot, showing the importance to reflect *afterwards* (in this case three days later).

Secondly, the moral dilemma she encountered highlights again the need for trust, openness, reciprocity and respect towards the research participants: the dimensions of ‘relational ethics’ (Dickson-Swift, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Wouters et al., 2014). The police organisation being under great public and political scrutiny (Lumsden & Winter, 2014) and especially regarding juveniles, adds an extra sensitive dimension to his concern. In recent research involving the police, it has been advised to answer participants' questions truthfully (Westmarland, 2016). Ultimately, we believe the researcher made a good decision by telling the participant the truth. In retrospect, lying seemed (again) a mistake because there was a risk that he would have taken that very seriously. Ethnographers subscribe to a code of ethics which specifies you should do no harm to the people under study (Fetterman, 2008). As lying has a potential for harm, we should always try – whenever applicable – to be as honest as possible. However, as many researchers such as Rowe (2007), Westmarland (2001), Falcone (2010) and Ellis (2007) note, you cannot draw general or uniform conclusions of prescriptive value (cfr. ‘ethics in advance’) when confronted with unpredictable, dynamic situations. As such, *“to have to tell all informants of intents, methods and possible outcomes, seems a guideline doomed to fail”* (Falcone, 2010, p. 250). This is the philosophical position of ‘situational ethics’: different situations call for different responses, depending on the concerns, needs, relationships etc. of the different stakeholders (Pollock, 2014).

The issue of process consent balanced against the opportunity to generate criminological data beneficial to the research, the researcher made a cost-benefit analysis and hoped - with the strategy of offering anonymity - to counterbalance this problem somehow. Still, the question remains whether this is enough. When published, the work will inevitably (comprise the risk to) have a certain ‘impact’, which can harm the interests of participants. The knowledge produced by research has considerable potential value for policymaking and the concerned (observed) practice. The research topic being ‘hot’ and sensitive, its results can gain the attention of the media and from certain audiences.[17] It seems an ethical imperative to – at least - think about the possible influence research might have when published. In this sense, the Belgian Ethical Code for Scientific Research mentions the need for 'caution' as a central value: *"researchers are acting with cautiousness when they are predictive and led by the desire to avoid harm to others"* (POD Wetenschapsbeleid, 2009, p. 5). According to Ferdinand et al. (2007) it is therefore important to consider in advance how this outcome or impact can be reconciled with the interest of research subjects. This could be for instance by considering asymmetries and the research context beforehand, to anticipate the concerns and interest of participants in a better way (Chege, 2015) but also by assuring full anonymity, as was done in this research.

---

[16] 18th of December 2015. Fieldnotes relating to a Youth Unit.

[17] According to Ferdinand et al. (2007) it is impossible to conduct and write up ethnographic research without having a political impact upon the research environment, or at least running this risk.

4. Participant-as observer issues

4.1 Leaving the observer's role

Whenever possible, the researcher tried to observe what was happening with the suspected juveniles *before* and *after* the interrogation because what is said and done before this conversation has an influence on people's temper afterwards. During the observations, she tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. Because as Fine (1993) notes: if researchers push events in a social scene in directions in which they would not otherwise have gone, what would we learn?

In the following example the researcher was about to observe the interrogation of two Romani girls, suspected of pickpocketing in the train station, in a specific police unit (not a Youth Unit). Before the interrogation, the girls were taken to the hospital by a patrol (police officers external to the unit) to do a bone scan in order to know their exact age. In this particular police unit, it is a standard procedure to know if the person is a minor or not, as the people being interrogated often don't have an ID document (the bone scan allows to establish the age with a certain error range). A patrol team external to the unit, consisting of a man and a woman, arrived at the police station to take the two girls to the hospital.

> I presented myself to them, briefly explained my research and informed them I would accompany them. The man immediately handcuffed the two girls and brought them to a combi car. As I heard the girls say something to each other in Italian I thought (as I speak a little Italian) that at least I'd be able to present myself to them and ask their permission to observe their interrogation. In the lift, they tried to talk to them (in French and in English) but the girls didn't seem to understand a word. When the woman saw my little notebook, I was given another suspicious glance (I already got one before). I commiserated with both the girls and the patrollers because of their incapacity to communicate. At that moment, I thought it would be strange just to watch everybody's discomfort knowing I could help and hoped that by translating the woman would be less apprehensive. When we got into a combi downstairs, I said to the patrollers – not thinking through – *"I heard they speak Italian…I speak a bit Italian, maybe I can help". "Ah, that is good news"* said the police woman. *« Ask them how old they are ».* After having explained to the girls I am not a police officer I enquired about their age. Natalija,[18] the youngest, told me she was eleven and that her sister Casna was thirteen. I translated this to the police officers.

'Impression management' towards research participants is of methodological as well as substantive significance to ethnographers because it determines the degree of success of their work (Berreman, 2012). The researchers' will to erase the hostility of the patrol woman by proposing help to render the situation more comfortable was such a strategy. But by proposing a translation service she overstepped a certain mark, which resulted in losing her researchers' role in the further course of events. This 'mistake' however, made it possible to witness police behaviour (see further) that is relevant to the experience of police culture.

---

[18] All names used are pseudonyms.

> *At the hospital*
> (…) We don't have to wait long, a quarter of an hour later they are brought to the room where the scanner is. They have to enter one by one. The youngest enters the room first, accompanied by the female officer. I ask if I can come as well, to further help with translating but also because I want to see the scan and the rest of the interaction. The female officer nods thankfully. A young doctor comes towards us and starts to talk to Natalija. " *She only speaks Italian and Serbian,"* I say. He tries in English. He asks her to put on a blouse with sleeves and to go sit on a chair in front of a table above which is hanging a big machine (the scan). Natalija looks with suspicion at the blouse and asks me *"Che cos'è (what's that)? Cosa vuole fare (what does he want to do)?". "È solo un scan, lui vuole fare una foto (It's only a scan, he wants to take a kind of picture)"* I say to her. The girl recoils and says *"ho paura!"* (*I'm afraid*). (…) The doctor says: *"look, you just put your hand here"* and shows her by laying his hand on the table, under the scan. *"Ma non voglio, ho paura" (But I don't want to, I'm scared)* she says, giving us a pathetic look. I translate for the bystanders. The police officers start to get irritated. *"Roooh, we're not going to spend the day on it!"* the woman exclaims. *"Tell her she has no choice!" I start to curse myself for my willingness to help and suddenly, I realise what I big mistake I had committed. I should not have told that I could speak Italian and should have behaved purely as an observer. I would never translate during an interrogation as I'm not a sworn interpreter, why the hell did I do it here then?! The worst is, I cannot suddenly stop 'helping' now. I've put myself in a mess*. I try to explain to Natalija again that the doctor just wants her to sit on the chair for a few minutes, in order to simply take a picture of her hand on the table. *"No, mi tagliano la mano! (they'll cut off my hand)"* she suddenly says, grabbing her hand. I cannot help but smile. *"Ma no (But no)!"* is my answer, and I give her a friendly poke. *"Si, mi tagliano la mano!"* she now shouts [making a cutting movement with her right hand on her left wrist]. I say *"Ti promesso che non succederà niente"* (*I promise you nothing will happen*). Natalija keeps displaying a pathetic look and repeats *"No, ho paura (No, I'm scared)"*. The female officer opens the door to tell her colleague (who's standing next to the other girl in the corridor) that she doesn't want to do the scan. I translate for the police officers that she is scared because she believes her hand will be cut off. I wonder if the girl is really scared, or if it's all a *mise-en-scène*. I suspect her to put on a show, the anxious face she has been displaying does not look very sincere. *"She has no choice. Tell her to go sit on that chair or she'll go to jail!"* the man says. I look at him, shocked. What the hell is he saying, I think. *« That is gonna scare her even more»* I say. *« You tell her! »* he commands. Grudgingly I tell her *"Natalija, il signore dice che se tu non lo fai, andrai in prigione… (mister here says that if you don't do it, you'll go to jail)" "In prigione?!"* she says, surprised. I immediately regret my words. I am truly angry with myself and this man who obliges me to say something like that to a kid. I start to sweat. *« Otherwise, we first try with the sister »* says the female police officer, and she seizes Natalija by her shoulders and leads her to the corridor (…)[19]

The decision to offer a 'translation service' seems unfortunate in hindsight. First, the police patrol woman was not a police interrogator with whom the researcher would have to interact in the future, meaning she was not a gatekeeper: an individual with the power to grant access to the specific research object (namely the interrogations) (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In view of the temporary nature of the interaction with her, it was not crucial to be accepted by her. Seeking acceptance too much led the researcher do things than were not in her remit. Second (more importantly), observer behaviour can act as a catalyst for reactivity and thus create a bias in the collected data (Spano, 2006).[20] Fine (1993) however, believes that the observer should recognise his participatory desires and add 'himself to the mix', not worrying too much about his presence as long as his impact is not *"excessively directive or substantive"* (p. 281).

---

[19] 20th of May 2015 – Fieldnotes relating to a specialized Unit (not a Youth Unit).

The researchers' behaviour influenced the way in which events unfolded and that same day, when she wrote down her fieldnotes, she reflected on this:

> *I think further about my own actions. I should never have offered my help. In fact, I didn't stay an observing researcher, I became part of the situation. I am very angry at myself, I should have known better. If I didn't meddle, the girls probably would never have started to panic, knowing nobody would understand them.*[21]

Her concern illustrates the wish to remain as unobtrusive as possible in order to produce knowledge with a 'likely validity' (Hammersley, 2014). On top of influencing the situation, she was dragged along by the events - which took an unpleasant turn - and was tossed into (ethical) problems (see further).

4.2 Witnessing violence. Should the researcher intervene?

> (…) In the corridor I see Natalija repeating that same cutting movement with her hand, addressing her sister. The male officer seizes Casna (the oldest) by her shoulders and leads her to the scan. *"No! Non voglio! (No, I don't want to)"* she screams. I try to explain to her as well that the scan won't do any harm, that it's just a picture of her hand. The doctor tries to demonstrate again what is going to happen. Casna keeps saying *"No, tagliano la mano!" (No, they cut off the hand)*. *"I don't have the patience for this"* says the male officer irritated. He grabs Casna by her shoulders and forces her to go sit on the chair. Casna resists and starts to scream. Screaming, screeching. Hysterically. The police man tries to control her and lays her hand on the table. The doctor holds the hand firmly and brings the scan above the hand. Casna screams even harder. I start to feel bad. *"Goddamn, tell her there are other patients in this hospital!"* the doctor says. (…) Suddenly, Casna goes into a kind of shock. Her whole body starts to shake. Again, I wonder if this is all a theatrical mise-en-scène, or if she's really scared to death. The situation is so absurd. *"I won't be able to take the picture, she moves too much. Her hand really has to be immobile"* the doctor says. *« Ok, I'm gonna call my superior »* says the male officer and he lets Casna loose. He takes his cell phone and rejoins his colleague in the corridor. When he comes back he says *« I have orders, I have to make her pass through this scan. So if I have to, I knock her out »*. I bust out in cold sweat. Casna doesn't weigh 50 kg, and he wants to punch her (and hard)? I don't want to witness that. (…) In the meantime, the female police officer has put her head through the door opening and says with anger: *"We're in Belgium here, we don't cut hands! We're not in your country!"* The doctor repeats that. He places both hands on the table, leans forward towards Casna who's sitting on the other side. *"Belgium!"* he says desperately. (…) *"According to me, it's a big performance"* says the female police officer. *« She knows we're about to discover her age, it's because of that » "I have never seen such a thing in thirteen years of career"* says the doctor. *« Sometimes women say they're pregnant to escape the scan but this…The problem is: it's impossible - if she clenches her hand, if she bends her fingers - to take the picture… I'm going to get an assistant as well as the plastic we use to keep children in place »*. Suddenly I get an idea. *"And if you do it with me?"* I say to the doctor. « *If they see there's no danger, they'll maybe do it? » « I'm not qualified to scan*

---

[20] However, poor rapport can also act as a potential source of bias in (police) observational data (Spano, 2006).

[21] Fieldnotes about the 20th of May 2015.

> *you, you don't have a prescription »* he says crestfallen. Then suddenly he lights up and says: *« We're gonna fake it!"*
> The police officers bring both girls into the room, so they can both see that the doctor 'takes the scan' with me. (…) I explain to the girls in Italian that the doctor is going to do the scan with me, to show there's no danger. (…) The police officers instruct the girls (who had calmed down) to pay attention, while the doctor's assistant undertakes the fake scan with me. I see that the doctor is looking at a computer behind the panel. *"Good, now it's your turn"* says the male officer to Natalija. I'm all tense and look at the girl, wondering if this has been enough to convince her. I expect a new scene but to my big surprise she goes to sit willingly on the chair. The doctor can take the scan tranquilly. Then it's her sisters turn. With a lot of reluctance, she goes to sit on the chair, but allows the assistant and the doctor to hold her hand and perform the scan. I sigh with relief. We now have to wait again in the corridor. (…) Five minutes later, the doctor comes give two documents to the police officers as well as two CD's. The male officer starts to read the document while we leave the building. *"Aha…the oldest is not thirteen, she's nineteen!"* he says. I stare at Casna, perplexed. She really doesn't look nineteen…she's so small and lean. *"And the other is not eleven but thirteen"* he adds. *"Fuck, that pisses me off"* says the female officer. *"I hate being lied to"*. Thereupon, we leave for the police station. *"According to me, that's the reason for this theatrical act, she's an adult… »* says the male officer.
> *(…) I don't know what to think of it. The youngest did seem to be faking when she displayed her pathetic face, saying they were going to "cut off her hand". But the oldest…can really start an acting career if this panic attack was faked. Maybe she truly was afraid because of the consequences related to the discovery of her age, because she still doesn't look good in my opinion. Very pale and curled up against her sister. (…)*
> *I also suddenly wonder what I would have done if the officer had hit the girl. I can't formulate an honest answer… I was so stressed at that moment. My head was spinning like a top. What if she had continued to refuse the scan... I'm so relieved that didn't happen, because the police officer would probably have hit her. It is only when we are back in the car that I start wondering if it is lawful to oblige a person to undergo such a scan. As the doctor seemed to believe it was normal to compel the girls, that thought didn't even cross my mind while it's obviously an important question…. I decide I will look it up later.*[22]

Discussing the nature of this (controversial) police behaviour or its motivational vectors –however relevant to the research project – would go beyond the scope of this methodological article. Rather, we will further reflect on the 'situational ethics' (situational factors associated with the dilemma) that come into the frame. In an introductory way, we will therefore narrate the first time that the researcher experienced a tense situation in which something violent might have happened, feeling the threat of force very present.

> Seydou is a seventeen year old juvenile who is suspected of having committed a gang rape. He has just been interrogated for two hours by interrogator Lucas. The victim (a girl of sixteen) accuses him in her statement as being one of the seven boys who has compelled her to perform a fellatio on each of them. His younger brother Samuel, aged fifteen, is being interrogated at the same moment. During the interrogation Seydou is nonchalant and arrogant (being the cool street bad boy by the way he's sitting on his chair, keeping his cap on and the way he's talking, taking the handkerchiefs of the interrogator without permission, etc.). He's assertive and not at all impressed or anxious. During the interrogation, he insults the victim several times or uses disrespectful language ("*whore*", "*could have fucked her*", etc.). His interrogator, Lucas, has

---

[22] 20th of May 2015. Fieldnotes relating to a Unit specialised in pick-pocketing (not a Youth Unit).

> showed signs of irritation during the interrogation because of his attitude but has managed to contain himself until now. When we come out of the interrogation room, the little brother Samuel and his interrogator come out of the room in front of us (at the other side of the corridor). We are now all standing in the corridor. Both brothers are put in handcuffs (from behind). Interrogator Lucas checks Seydou's coat to verify if it contains any stuff that could make the metal detector ring. He curses when he finds some small change. *"Didn't they search you or what?!"* He also searches the pockets of the boy and finds another few cents, tissues, etc. The brothers seem to find the situation very funny. They grin at each other and start talking in their dialect (a mixture of language Y and Z). We do understand a few words: the name of the victim and the word "*whore*". Suddenly Lucas gets very angry. *"Your lack of respect is starting to piss me off, she's not a whore!"* he says. *"Yes, she is, she has to admit it, that's all,"* answers Seydou. The interrogator loses it and shouts *"Fuck, fifteen years ago I would have beaten you up, you little shit."* I wonder if he regrets that phrase, as he pertinently knows it has not escaped my ears. He walks to the interrogation room which is also his office when he hears Seydou replying: *"The only shit here is you."* The interrogator turns around and screams furiously: *"What did you say?!" "You don't scare me"* the boy answers. The interrogator brings his face close to that of the boys and screams: *« You want me to take off your handcuffs to explain yourself with me? You won't stand two seconds against me man! »* He keeps his face close to that of Seydou and for a while they just look silently – gnashing their teeth – at each other. The interrogator has become red with anger. There's a lot of tension in the air. The audience (the brother, myself and the two colleagues) is watching the scene silently. I'm wondering – a bit anxious – what's going to happen next. The colleagues of the interrogator don't move. *"You're all red"* says Seydou to Lucas. I'm astonished by this boy's nerve and I almost laugh because of his remark. *"Yeah, sure you can't become red"* answers Lucas, whose anger seems suddenly diminished. I'm surprised but this is it, the incident is closed and they take the boys downstairs to the cars. I wonder why the colleagues didn't try to calm down the situation. Is it because they think Lucas should calm down by himself (to preserve his pride? Is it a power game between him and the suspect)? Do they only intervene when it comes to physical violence, or wouldn't they interfere, whatever happens?[23]

When the researcher started the fieldwork, she knew she could encounter malpractice or controversial police behaviour. If you do not contemplate having to face such an issue when you are doing police ethnography, you are quite naïve according to Norris (1993). But as the majority of the interrogations she had seen until then were in control, she had not expected violence in the police station itself. Consequently, she never thought about what to do if a situation escalated and came to blows. Even if this incident was minor, it was a relevant one in the process of reflecting on her researcher's role. First of all, the researcher reflected on the 'observers' effects' of her presence. According to Reisig et al. (2004) the (size of) the audience observing the encounter also influences whether suspects behave disrespectfully[24].

Secondly, when she recounted this event to her supervisors and was asked: "what would you have done if the situation had escalated?" she did not have a clear-cut answer. In the situation concerned, she managed to maintain an observer's role because physical violence did not take place. But since she had no 'plan' in regard to witnessing violence, she had no idea what her reaction would have been had the situation ended in physical combat.

---

[23] 6th of February 2015. Fieldnotes relating to a specialized Unit (but not a Youth Unit).

[24] *"An audience may aggravate social exchanges between suspects and the police, especially if the suspect identifies with the audience or considers their views personally salient. Obsequiousness before such a crowd may be humiliating for the suspect. Under these conditions a suspect may challenge an officer with displays of disrespect"* (Reisig et al., 2004). Even if the costs might be great, by "putting up a good fight" and projecting a "resolute, courageous, and tough" identity the suspect can be better able to preserve his or her image in the eyes of audience members (Reisig et al., 2004; Tedeschi & Nesler, 1993) .

With her supervisors, she discussed the question: at what point does violence cross the 'line' and action needs to be taken? When do you intervene? Or should you ever? Jauregui (2013) believes (in the context of 'dirty' police work or evil actions in which you can become an 'accomplice') that the researcher must do his job: build knowledge about humanity and meaning-making even if this means transgressing boundaries, because even if you aim to be 'pure' with your intentions, you can never be so in the act of observation. You must then remain aware of your (strategic) complicity, your involvement, and maintain your integrity and ethical responsibility by *"critically questioning what people say there are doing, what people actually are doing, and what people say about why people are doing what they are doing"* (p. 147). However repulsed we may be by violence, it is indeed crucial *"to understand its multiplicity and legitimation"* (p. 143) which is only possible when observing it. Westmarland (2001) argues along the same line that it is crucial to concentrate on witnessing how violent situations develop, to record the reactions of those involved to be able to reflect upon why certain categories of violence occur. This way, we can "(…) *integrate this understanding with our explanations of the wider swath of police practices and their meanings"* (Jauregui, 2013, p. 143). According to us however, we should rely on the ability of the researcher to contextualise and particularise his or her moral grounding on a site to site basis (Falcone, 2010). In order words, the researcher should then be "*his or her own moralist*" (Punch, 1986) and take decisions congruent with his/her sense of integrity. To do otherwise would leave the researcher with a serious "*ethical hangover*" (see *supra*). This also does justice to *"the creative power of social relations"* by preventing the domination of 'anticipated negotiations' and 'ethics in advance' (Strathern, 2000, p. 295). The ethical stance that should be taken will thus vary in each situation. Where the researcher would probably not have crossed the boundaries of the observer's role in the situation with Seydou (i.e. to intervene in case of physical violence), she took another stance concerning the situation with the Romani girls. Ethical research – according to Punch (1986) – is reliant on the integrity of the researcher and the ongoing interrogation of what types of responsibilities you might owe to others. First of all, she was not completely innocent regarding the turn of events. As she felt responsible, she (unconsciously) used her creativity to try to avoid Casna being harmed (proposing to do the scan herself). She argues this is an attitude she would have extended if the police officer really punched the girl. In that case, she would have felt the duty (to at least try) to convince him to avoid physical violence, otherwise the 'ethical hangover' would have been unbearable. Secondly, in contrast with the other situation, this police officer was not a key person who could have possibly given her access to other interrogations. Subsequently, engaging in a discussion with him would have had less consequences for her access to the field. Whether she would have been really capable of doing this deserves some sceptical attention though. As she did not dare to refuse to translate the officers' threats, it is unlikely that she would have been able to really resist his authority if he had decided to employ physical violence as a coercive method. In this sense, researchers may want to act with more integrity than they would actually dare to do in these situations.

"What will you do?" In the case of police misconduct it seems not in the remit of the researcher to intervene because after all, their job (the purpose of academic research) is "*to advance knowledge, rather than to serve any particular dominant moral standpoint"* (Pearson, 2009, p. 252). Police ethnographers have asserted that police observation generally necessitates some sort of artificial identity, avoiding interferences with own attitudes and viewpoints (i.e. 'moral' conflicts) (Demaree, Verwee, & Enhus, 2013; Punch, 1989a; Spano, 2005). However, if the witnessed behaviour evolves

towards ‘gross’ violence (such as torture) the ethical ground on which the researcher stands becomes shakier. Can remaining a passive observer in that case be justified on the grounds that it is necessary to prevent distortion of the field and preserve access to it? It is very difficult to watch someone (especially a juvenile) be hit and remain a passive observer. People do not cross the setting unaffected and indifferent as if they were bonces on an inclined plane (Gutwirth & Christiaens, 2014). Moreover, the question then rises whether failure to act gives way to liability - as culpable omission could be punishable for the researcher. This issue is not referred to in ethical codes, although according to Pearson (2009) it can be it can be inferred that academics are expected to abide the law when carrying out their research. But as he rightly notes, if we cannot break the law in observing police practices, “*some aspects of society will remain hidden or misunderstood, with negative consequences for those in, or affected by, those areas”*, “*(…) keeping harm and injustices hidden from the public”* as a consequence and reducing the value of academic research in terms of ‘making a difference’ (Pearson, 2009, p. 252). Norris (1993) analysed this dilemma and summarizes the debate well: a pure legalist position that argues for the adherence to a professional code of conduct or inviolable rules such as human rights, ignores the complexity of the construction of a research role and the ambiguity of ethnographic fieldwork. On the other hand, to reject any consideration of ethics in favour of the valuable position of ‘exposing the powerful’ is also simplistic and reducing. According to him, to follow the situational philosophy provides a better answer. Ultimately field-workers have to make their own decisions which acknowledges the reality of ethnographic research: different situations and different researchers, with their individual conscience that has its own parameters (Norris, 1993). He echoes Reynolds (1982), who says that “*It is for each social scientist to decide how they wish to serve society: as a personal moral exemplar or as a source of useful and valued information”* (p. 213).
In this sense, when confronted with police misconduct, fieldwork will always be dancing on a tightrope: between abandoning social research for a moral crusade and being left with an ethical hangover.

Integrity and integrity policy in science also contains the support of researchers dealing with difficult dilemmas (Wouters et al., 2014). In any event, the discussion with the supervisors was useful in this respect. Through informal discussions with supervisors but also with fellow colleagues (‘peer debriefing’), the researcher created an ‘audit-track’ that increases the solidity of the data.
Punch (1989b) considers peer support to be healthy, as ‘debriefing sessions’ are a release mechanism as well as a technique for ‘getting the field into focus’. Since researchers have a big scientific, societal and social responsibility, according to van de Bunt (2015) it is essential that they have a critical environment and thus, that they are ‘controlled’ by their peers. Moreover, peer support and guidance can guard each other from believing that we have finally arrived in our pursuit of moral engagement and ethical ethnography (Falcone, 2010). That guidance should not materialize in codes of ethics because these are inappropriate (Pearson, 2009; Punch, 1989a) but rather, should consist of interpersonal verbal exchanges. However, these should not over-rationalize what was confused, ambivalent and arbitrary (Norris, 1993).

Conclusion

Researchers are often exposed to the unpredictable nature of qualitative research. They experience how troubling fieldwork can be and are confronted with conflicting principles that have to be balanced against one another. During their research, they experience that meeting the other implies an unavoidable invitation to act ethically (Levinas, 1966 in Walgrave, 2014): in this way the researcher learns to be ethical in relationships with others.

The majority of commentators conclude that when solving ethical dilemmas much depends on decisions made by the individual researcher. Ethical research largely depends upon the integrity of the researcher and their ability to particularise and contextualise. Therefore, they have the discretion because their interpretation is required in unpredictable situations. But there is no moral high ground or 'right stance' that can be maintained. Ethical principles cannot be translated in rational guidelines of prescriptive value as different fieldwork situations bring along different ethical dimensions (such as situational ethics, relational ethics, etc.). Honesty towards research participants and avoiding harm to other persons for instance, are principles that should be strived for but are not always 100% applicable.

In this article, we tried to show that researcher's mistakes and dilemmas are part of a learning process: it is through them that ethnographers learn the 'art' or 'craft' of doing (ethical) fieldwork. By creating a very transparent audit track in which researchers describe research dilemmas, the way they are solved and the choices within, you increase reflexivity and thus external reliability. In short, this process of learning creates intense methodological awareness, which empowers research competency on one hand, and increases the quality of the research on the other.

The dilemmas the researcher encountered during fieldwork were discussed under two main topics: informing participants and participant-as-observer issues. Concerning the aspect of informing participants, we believe a sociologically informed approach (such as introducing concepts in later stadia and answering questions as honestly as possible) or a mutually empowering approach can provide tools to deal with the ambivalence that this important research aspect presents. It also seems necessary to anticipate how (non) disclosure is likely to be interpreted and to anticipate the concerns and interests of subjects in this regard. Concerning the participant-as-observer issues, discerning the researcher's limits is, in our view, a matter of ethics, theory, and learning - rather than a matter of controlled participation based on previous 'field risk' assumptions, preventive tactics or prescriptive guidelines. Inexperienced researchers will always be ill-prepared to cope with controversial police behaviour because they are required to exercise restraint and to adopt an artificial identity through which their own moral viewpoints have to be left behind. However, there is no black and white picture as a researcher might always decide to balance all the issues and decide something is not worth the ethical hangover. This is why there has to be room for discretion and creativity on behalf of the fieldworker.

Acquiring a defensible position demands critical peer support. In this research, we experienced how an open dialogue with senior or junior researchers can help cope with ambiguity and failure. Moreover, it can encourage researchers to acknowledge their mistakes and dilemmas in order to contribute to scientific debate. "*By accepting our discomfort, acknowledging it publicly, and writing through it, we integrate it into our processes of knowledge production and use it to explore ways of seeing and knowing the world"* (DeLuca & Maddox, 2015, p. 13). Reflecting on each other's mistakes and dilemmas adds an extra dimension to ethical reflexivity and will definitely help researchers to be more empowered to make decisions while they engage in research. By considering the consequences of their actions, researchers also improve their defensible position *post* fieldwork as they are publicly prepared to defend their own choices.

However, referring to ethical decision-making as a process of ‘learning on the spot’, might encompass a major pitfall. Therefore, considering research errors as a learning process cannot be an excuse to enter the field completely unprepared. It is still important to warm up for the ethical dimensions in advance. This way, a defensible position is created *prior* to entering the field (Yates, 2004) and the researcher might be able to find solutions to the encountered dilemmas with less difficulty.

Bibliography

Allmark, P., Boote, J., Chambers, E., Clarke, A., McDonell, A., Thompson, A. R., & Tod, A. (2009). Ethical issues in the use of in-depth interviews: literature review and discussion. *Research Ethics Review, 5*(2), 48-54.

Austin, W. J. (2008). Relational Ethics. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 1014). Los Angeles: Sage.

Barry, V. (1985). *Applying Ethics: A Text with Readings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Berreman, G. D. (2012). Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Managment. In A. C. G. M. Robben & J. A. Sluka (Eds.), *Ethnographic fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader* (pp. 153-174). India: John Wiley & Sons.

Bishop, D., & Farber, H. B. (2007). Joining the legal significance of adolescent developmental capacities with the legal rights provided by in re gault. *Rutgers Law Review, 60*, 125-172.

Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(3), 1-9.

Caulfield, L., & Hill, J. (2014). *Criminological research for beginners: a student's guide*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chege, N. (2015). "What's in it for me?": Negotiations of asymmetries, concerns and interests between the researcher and research subjects. *Ethnography, 16*(4), 463-481.

Claeys, C., Dumortier, E., & De Kimpe, S. (2015). Should I stay or should I go? Reflecting about experienced methodological issues. *GERN Paper Series, 3*(Criminology, Security and Justice. Methodological and epistemological issues), 15-39.

Corbetta, P. (2003). *Social Research: theory, methods and techniques*. London: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* USA: Sage Publications.

Crow, G., Wiles, R., Heat, S., & Charles, V. (2006). Research Ethics and Data Quality: The Implications of Informed Consent. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 9*(2), 83-95.

Decorte, T., & Zaitch, D. (Eds.). (2010). *Kwalitatieve methoden en technieken in de criminologie*. Leuven: Acco.

DeLuca, J. R., & Maddox, C. B. (2015). Tales from the Ethnographic Field: Navigating Feelings of Guilt and Privilege in the Research Process. *Field Methods*, 1-16.

Demaree, C., Verwee, I., & Enhus, E. (2013). Observing the observers. Participant observation in police settings. In K. Beyens, J. Christiaens, B. Claes, S. De Ridder, H. Tournel, & H. Tubex (Eds.), *The pains of doing criminological research* (pp. 104-118). Brussels: VUBPress.

Dickson-Swift, V. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research, 9*(1), 61-79.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007). Doins sensitive research: what challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research, 7*(3), 327-353.

Drizin, S. A., & Leo, R. A. (2004). The problem of false confessions in the Post DNA-world. *North Carolina Law Review, 82*, 891-1007.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3-29.

Falcone, J. M. (2010). 'I spy…': The (Im)possibilities of Ethical Participant Observation with Antagonists, Religious Extremists, and Other Tough Nuts. *Michigan Discussions in Anthropology, 18*, 243–282.

Feld, B. C. (2013). Behind Closed Doors: What really happens when cops question kids. *Cornell Journal of Law & Public Policy, 23*, 395-462.

Ferdinand, J., Pearson, G., Rowe, M., & Worthington, F. (2007). A different kind of ethics. *Ethnography, 8*(4), 519–543.

Fetterman, D. M. (2008). Ethnography. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 1014). Los Angeles: Sage.

Fine, G. A. (1993). Ten Lies of Ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 22*(3), 267-293.

Fischer, R. J. (1993). Social Desirability Bias and the Validity of Indirect Questioning. *Journal of Consumer Research, 20*(2), 303-315.

Goode, E. (1996). The ethics of deception in social research: a case study. *Qualitative Sociology, 19*(1), 11-33.

Gudjonsson, G. H. (2010). Psychological vulnerabilities during police interviews. Why are they important? *Legal and Criminological Psychology, 15*, 161-175.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*(2), 261-280.

Gutwirth, S., & Christiaens, J. (2014). It's the science policy, stupid! Over wetenschapsfraude als bliksemafleider. *Panopticon, 35*, 267-287.

Hagan, F. E. (2005). *Essentials of Research Methods in Criminal Justice and Criminology*. USA: Pearson Education.

Hammersley, M. (2014). *The Limits of Social Science: causal explanation and value relevance*. London: Sage.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice. Third edition*. USA - Canada: Routledge.

Hammersley, M., & Traianou, A. (2012). *Ethics in qualitative research: controversies and contexts*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Iphofen, R. (2015). *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. Brussels: DG Research and Innovation of the European Commission

Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2008). Informed Consent. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 431-432). Los Angeles: Sage.

Jauregui, B. (2013). Dirty Anthropology: Epistemologies of Violence and Ethical Entaglements in Police Ethnography. In W. Garriott (Ed.), *Policing and Contemporary Governance* (pp. 280). USA: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jemielniak, D., & Kostera, M. (2010). Narratives of Irony and Failure in Ethnographic Work. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences, 27*(4), 335-347.

Kinderrechtencommissariaat. (2012). Jongeren en politie: aanbevelingen voor meer toenadering. *Advies van het Kinderrechtencommissariaat*, 1-18.

Lumsden, K., & Winter, A. (2014). Reflexivity in Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marcus, G. E. (1998). *Ethnography through thick and thin*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Matthews, B., & Ross, L. (2010). *Research Methods*. England: Pearson Education Limited.

May, T. (1993). Feelings Matter: Inverting the Hidden Equation. In D. Hobbs & T. May (Eds.), *Interpreting the field: Accounts of Ethnography* (pp. 70-94). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKechnie, L. E. F. (2008). Participant Observation. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 598-599). Los Angeles: Sage.

McNeill, P., & Chapman, S. (2005). *Research Methods*. USA and Canada: Routledge.

Miller, T., & Boulton, M. (2008). Changing Constructions of Informed Consent: Qualitative Research and Complex Social Worlds. *Social Science & Medicine, 65*, 2199–2211.

Mortelmans, D. (2013). *Handboek Kwalitatieve Onderzoeksmethoden*. Leuven: Acco.

Murtagh, L. (2007). Implementing a critically quasi-ethnographic approach. *The Qualitative Report, 12*(2), 193-215.

Norris, C. (1993). Some ethical considerations on field-work with the police. In D. Hobbs & T. May (Eds.), *Interpreting the field: Accounts of ethnography* (pp. 122-143). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

O'Gorman, A., & Vander Laenen, F. (2010). Ethische aspecten van het kwalitatief onderzoek. In T. Decorte & D. Zaitch (Eds.), *Kwalitatieve methoden en technieken in de criminologie* (pp. 576). Leuven: Acco.

Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 33*(1), 93-96.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbery Park, CA: Sage.

Pearson, G. (2009). The researcher as hooligan: where 'participant' observation means breaking the law. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 12*(3), 243–255.

Penne, A., Raes, A., Deveux, E., Deladriere, A., De Keulenaer, S., Franssens, M., & Decramer, K. (2012). *Evaluatie Salduz-wet: Derde tussentijds rapport*. Brussel: Dienst voor het Strafrechtelijk beleid.

POD Wetenschapsbeleid. (2009). *Ethische code van het wetenschappelijk onderzoek in België*. Bruxelles: Politique Scientifique Fédérale.

Pojman, L. P. (2012). *Discovering Right and Wrong*. USA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

Pollock, J. M. (2014). *Ethical Dilemmas and Decisions in Criminal Justice*. USA: Wadsworth.

Preissle, J. (2008). Ethics. In M. L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 273-277). Los Angeles: Sage.

Pruvost, G. (2007). Enqueter sur les policiers: entre devoir de réserve, héroïsation et accès au monde privé. *Terrain (Revue d'Ethnologie de l'Europe), 48*, 131-148.

Punch, M. (1986). *The politics and ethics of fieldwork*. California: Sage.

Punch, M. (1989a). Researching Police Deviance - a Personal Encounter with the Limitations and Liabilities of Field-Work. *British Journal of Sociology, 40*(2), 177-204.

Punch, M. (1989b). Researching police deviance: a personal encounter with the limitations and liabilities of field-work *The British Journal of Sociology, 40*(2), 177-204.

Reisig, M. D., McCluskey, J. D., Matrofski, S. D., & Terrill, W. (2004). Suspect disrespect toward the police. *Justice Quarterly, 21*(2), 241-268.

Resnik, D. B. (2010). *The Ethics of Science. An Introduction*. USA and Canada: Routledge.

Reynolds, P. D. (1982). Moral Judgments: strategies for analysis with application to covert participant observation. In M. Bulmer (Ed.), *Social Research Ethics: an examination of the merits of covert participant observation* (pp. 185-230). New York: Holmes and Meier.

Robertson, C. J., Crittenden, W. F., Brady, M. K., & Hoffman, J. J. (2002). Situational Ethics Across Borders: A Multicultural Examination. *Journal of Business Ethics, 38*, 327–338.

Rowe, M. (2007). Tripping Over Molehills: Ethics and the Ethnography of Police Work. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 10*(1), 37–48.

Schwartz, O. (1993). Postface: l'empirisme irréductible. In N. Anderson & O. Schwartz (Eds.), *Le Hobo. Sociologie du sans-abri* (pp. 380-390). Paris: Armand Collin.

Sherman, L. (1981). *The Teaching of Ethics in Criminology and Criminal Justice* Washington, DC: Joint Commission on Criminology and Criminal Justice Education and Standards, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

Spano, R. (2005). Potential sources of observer bias in police observational data. *Social Science Research, 34*, 591–617.

Spano, R. (2006). Observer behavior as a potential source of reactivity: describing and quantifying observer effects in a large-scale observational study of police. *Sociological Methods & Research, 34*, 521-553.

Strathern, M. (Ed.) (2000). *Audit Cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*. New York: Routledge.

Tedeschi, J. T., & Nesler, M. T. (1993). Grievances: Development and reactions. In R. B. Felson & J. T. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Aggression and violence: Social interactionist perspectives* (pp. 13-45). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
ten Have, P. (2004). *Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology*. London: Sage.
van de Bunt, H. (2015). Ethische dilemma's bij criminologisch onderzoek *Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit, 5*(1), 55-69.
Vanderhallen, M., van Oosterhout, M., Panzavolta, M., & de Vocht, D. (Eds.). (2016). *Interrogating Young Suspects: Procedural Safeguards from an Empirical Perspective*. Cambridge - Antwerp - Portland: Intersentia.
Walgrave, L. (2014). Reflecties over de maatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid van de criminologische wetenschap(per) (en andere maatschappijwetenschappen). *Panopticon, 35*(4), 288-301.
Westmarland, L. (2001). Blowing the whistle on police violence. *British Journal of Criminology, 41*, 523–535.
Westmarland, L. (2016). Outsiders inside: ethnography and police culture. In M. Brunger, S. Tong, & D. Martin (Eds.), *Introduction to Policing Research: Taking Lessons from Practice* (pp. 163-173). New York: Routledge.
Worley, R. M., Worley, V. B., & Wood, B. A. (2016). "There were ethical dilemmas all day long!": harrowing tales of ethnographic researchers in criminology and criminal justice. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 1-20.
Wouters, K., Loyens, K., Maesschalck, J., & De Schrijver, A. (2014). Morele dilemma's bij criminologisch onderzoek. *Panopticon, 35*(4), 313-335.