Tested Neutrality: Emotional Challenges in Qualitative Interviews on Homicide and Rape

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Abstract

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee in the qualitative research interview implies a power imbalance as the researcher possesses the authority to frame the interview and ask the questions. Many feminist researchers have thus emphasized the importance of establishing rapport with the informant. In this article the consequences of the researcher’s sym/antipathies towards her informants are examined. Parts of two interviews are presented in order to show how the researcher’s emotional reactions entail hers as well as the informants’ verbal responses and consequently the generation of data. In the interviews the female researcher was particularly emotionally challenged as they were of a delicate nature in which gender interplayed: a woman doing interviews with male refugees convicted for homicide and rape against female victims. It is further discussed whether sympathy and rapport or antipathy and a confrontational interview style—the consequences of the researchers’ emotional responses to the narratives of the offences and the attitude of the interviewees—produced the best data. The article concludes that good intentions about avoiding prejudice by not reading the men's files and verdicts in advance may have been a wrong decision as it left the researcher insufficiently emotionally prepared for the information revealed in the interviews and for the encounter with the informants.

KEY WORDS: Antagonism, Power relationship, Qualitative interviews, Rapport, Violent offenders

Introduction

The ways in which the researcher may be challenged emotionally through qualitative in-depth interviews are surprisingly unspoken of in the research literature and amongst researchers. Emotional reactions during interviews must be quite common but accepted as a distressful part of the research process and as such not necessarily spoken of and taken into consideration, a fact which likely affects the interview situation. To reflect upon such emotions is particularly relevant for criminologists who will often interview offenders about their crimes and the backgrounds to why they were committed. As most offenders are men, such reflections are even more important for female researchers.

Lots of methodology literature deals with the researchers’ approaches to the informants—approaches which may be tinted by own background—and the ways the researcher should deal with the difficulties this may provide in order to achieve rapport and produce rich data from the interviews. The issue of class, gender, and race in the qualitative research interview has for example been dealt with when white, middle-class female researchers interview black women, when men interview women, and when women interview men (e.g. Harding 1987; Edwards 1990; Liddle 1996; Gunaratnam 2003; Presser 2004, 2005; Grenz 2005; Skrinjar 2005; Spalek 2005). Even when the researchers interviewed incarcerated men convicted for...
abduction and homicide of children, the researchers avoided reporting about what emotions these interviews provoked in them (Beyer and Beasley 2003). In another study involving interviews with incarcerated men convicted for violent crimes, the author wrote extensively about the interaction in the interviews, without revealing any of her feelings about the fact that one of her respondents whom she followed for 8 months was subsequently executed, despite her concerns about her respondent’s ideas about her feelings about it (Presser 2005:2083). Nor did she say how she felt when the same respondent made sexual comments. Consequently there is a lack of literature about the process the researcher goes through when she is conducting interviews (but see Sutton and Shurman 1988; Ramsey 1996; Grenz 2005; Skrinjar 2005; Knowles 2006; Owens 2006). What happens to the researcher herself? Feminist research principles—to which I adhere—call for reflexivity in the research process (e.g. Harding 1987; Gadd 2004; Presser 2004, 2005; Enosh and Buchbinder 2005; Grenz 2005; Sin 2005:103; Skrinjar 2005:99), I will address not only the interview process, but also how both researcher and informant may be affected in interviews of this sensitive nature. Owens says: ‘the success or failure of any given narrative is a collaborative venture between the teller and the listener’, thus: the researcher has a responsibility in expanding the space of the interview so that the participant may recount difficult experiences with greater ease (Owens 2006:1161). Data, knowledge, and ‘truth’ are socially constructed, and there are multiple ‘truths’ emerging under different circumstances; thus not only the data gathered but indeed the process of ‘data collection’ needs attention. The what (the content) and the how (the way in which the meaning of the content is constructed) are both crucial elements in the interview (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005:590).

I will thus examine how my emotional reactions to the men’s narratives and attitudes may have affected the informants and interplayed in the production of data, as I adopted different interview styles as a consequence of my sym/antipathies towards the informants. My intention is complex: I will examine how I as a white, female researcher was emotionally affected by two interviews which dealt with homicides and rapes and see how the fact that the informants were men, of a different ethnicity, and convicted for crimes against women, made the interviews particularly emotionally challenging. The reason why these two (out of six) interviews are chosen for analysis is that they provoked different and particularly strong emotional responses in me, as I came to regard ‘John’ with sympathy and ‘Yusuf’ with antipathy during the interviews. My emotions will thus be analysed as part of the empirical evidence. As Ramsey says: ‘By attending to emotions in research, the researcher is forced to assess the effects her/his emotional state has on the research’ (Ramsey 1996:143).

Perceiving that interviews are ‘data generation’ rather than ‘data collection’ (Gadd 2004; Presser 2004; Enosh and Buchbinder 2005; Grenz 2005; Sin 2005:103; Skrinjar 2005:99), I will address not only the interview process, but also how both researcher and informant may be affected in interviews of this sensitive nature. Owens says: ‘the success or failure of any given narrative is a collaborative venture between the teller and the listener’, thus: the researcher has a responsibility in expanding the space of the interview so that the participant may recount difficult experiences with greater ease (Owens 2006:1161). Data, knowledge, and ‘truth’ are socially constructed, and there are multiple ‘truths’ emerging under different circumstances; thus not only the data gathered but indeed the process of ‘data collection’ needs attention. The what (the content) and the how (the way in which the meaning of the content is constructed) are both crucial elements in the interview (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005:590).

I will thus examine how my emotional reactions to the men’s narratives and attitudes may have affected the informants and interplayed in the production of data, as I adopted different interview styles as a consequence of my sym/antipathies towards the informants.
Implicit in this is also an examination of the power relation in the qualitative research interview. I will not analyse the reasons why these men committed these crimes as this has been dealt with on previous occasions (Sollund 1999a, 2001).

The research project which forms the background to the paper was conducted in 1998/1999, nearly 10 years ago, a fact which illustrates that I as a researcher have had problems in creating an emotional distance to the experiences. Rather to the contrary, the urge to share with the academic community the experience of the interviews has increased through the years, as I have grown to realize the emotional impact especially one of the interviews (that with John) had on me. Knowledge which is constructed in the interview depends on the dynamic between the two parties. Analysis of this dynamic may be easier produced with hindsight, when it is no longer so urgent to present the results the project set out to find (Gadd 2004).

Background and methodology

One purpose of the project was to investigate the number of male refugees convicted for violent crimes in Norway as mass media articles had been claiming that especially young, male refugees were in fact ‘ticking bombs’. A survey was directed to prisons’ managements in order to map the total number of male refugees aged 15–35, convicted and imprisoned for violent crimes, including rape, homicide, physical abuse, armed robbery, and arson. I recruited and conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 of these in total 16 men, underlining in the introduction letter, which was translated to their own language, that participation was voluntarily. Four were convicted for crimes which entailed death, three were convicted for rape and intent of rape, while two were convicted for numerous offences. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5–2 hours. Interviews were also conducted with welfare assistants in the institutions, and finally I analysed the verdicts and other documents in the men’s files which also included testimonies, photos from the crime scenes, and declarations from the psychiatrists appointed by the court. I did not examine the files until after the interviews in order to avoid prejudice, and I did not know in advance for which crimes the informants were convicted. In the beginning of the interviews I asked for consent from the informants to examine their files, despite the fact that verdicts are publicly available. I explained that I wanted to hear their versions of their crimes first. Some suggested that I read their files even before I brought it up.

First I will briefly describe the positions in the interview relationship as this is important to understand the experience of the interviews, both for researcher and informant.

The researcher’s versus the informants’ position

The researcher–informant relationship is a power relationship in which the researcher, as the one asking the questions and with the authority of the one who ‘knows’, is in a superior position which is also reflected through her/his

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1Men with political asylum or residence on humanitarian grounds.

2For further discussion of the ethical dilemmas connected to this project, see Sollund 1999b.
active position versus the more passive position of the informant who must respond to the researcher (Ramsey 1996; Hollway and Jefferson 1997:68; Gadd 2004; Presser 2004; Grenz 2005; Presser 2005; Owens 2006:1166, 1167). The imbalance of this relationship was further enhanced by the fact that as a Norwegian, I am part of the white majority population, while the informants as refugees all were ethnic minorities, who desired to achieve residence permit in Norway. They were also prisoners, while I was free. The only thing they were empowered to do was to reject participation through the letter of consent. Still they may have failed to realize that they were in fact free to do so. They may, for example, have believed that giving consent to the interview could make their situation in prison easier, or even influence their verdicts or their residence permits, even though I explicitly said in the introduction letter that the interview would give them no such benefits. Their isolation in prison may also have made them more inclined to give consent as they may have appreciated the opportunity of female company. As a researcher, I may be accused of taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of imprisoned refugees with an uncertain future, in which several of them were not only convicted to prison but also expected to be expelled from the country once the verdict was expiated.

The power imbalance created by these circumstances may have been somewhat restored by the gender of interviewer and interviewees, as interviewing is an ‘intrinsically feminine’ activity, and the interviewer’s job is to facilitate speech and not interrupt it. This experience is potentially oppressive and frustrating to a feminist researcher interviewing men (Smart in Ramsey 1996:139). Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001, in Skrinjar 2005:101–102) find that interviews with men, independently of the gender of the interviewers, are special in the sense that they provide both a threat and a possibility to stage masculinity for the interviewee. Masculinity may be expressed through portraying control, independence, risk-taking, rationality, etc. Such attempts of compensatory control may have been balanced because of my superior position as a researcher and their situation as convicts. Grenz says for example: ‘The fact that a woman is not just listening selflessly to a man’s talk, that is she is in the position of a researcher whereas the one who talks is being researched, subverts stereotypical roles and with them power relations’ (Grenz 2005:2105).

The interview is a situation in which power fluctuates between the two parties. Both will try to steer the other and interviewees may choose to evade questions which leaves the interviewer in a vulnerable situation because ‘data collection’ may be jeopardized. As Enosh and Buchbinder say: ‘[From this perspective], every interview, especially one that touches on sensitive issues, is a power struggle between interviewer and interviewee rather than co-operation’ (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005:615). Whether the interview takes the form of a struggle or a collaborative effort to produce meaning will not only depend on the topic of the interview, the interview setting, and the gender of interviewer and interviewee, but also on strategies adopted in the interview process. Strategies may be conscious—as efforts to produce rapport, and attempts
to make the interviewees associate freely by posing open-ended questions, and by the researcher keeping silent or mainly making encouraging noises. Or strategies may be unconscious when the researcher responds intuitively to unpredicted situations and information. My strategies were to try to maintain a neutral expression, in order not to deter informants from speaking by exhibiting judgment, and to ask open-ended questions and make probes to make them elaborate.

**The interview experiences**

To convey my experiences from the interview situations, it is necessary to show at least partly how the interviews developed. Three of the men were convicted for rape, a crime which is gendered (Los 1990), as it is committed by men and most of the time against women (e.g. Stanko 1990). Although I did not know for what exactly the men had been convicted, I approached the interview situation with more emotional awareness than other interviews. The men’s situations as prisoners underlined that they could be perceived as a threat, not only to their victims but indirectly to all women, due both to the hegemonic power of men and their superior physical strength demonstrated through their actions. As Presser says: ‘Women researchers, myself included, are unlikely to feel at ease interviewing men who have raped and murdered, who are not under state-derived control’ (Presser 2005:2069). However, in my experience, not even while under state control did it feel comfortable to interview men convicted for violent crimes against women, as the reminder of what they had been capable of was constantly there due to the topic of the interviews. This uneasiness can also be explained by a general feminine experience of vulnerability (Stanko 1990:85).

The closeness of the interview situations, during five of which we were locked up in a small visitor room in the prison, contributed to its unpleasantness as it was a social situation that I felt I could not escape until the interviews were completed. The interview with John took place in an open psychiatric institution. The different settings of the interviews may have affected the different atmospheres during the interviews.

**The interview with ‘John’**

John is a man in his early 30s at the time of the interview. He is calm and verbal even though he speaks Norwegian, a foreign language to him. I come to see him in the psychiatric institution where he is on preventional detention. We sit face to face in the sitting room, he serves me coffee and cakes, and we are alone. After some background questions about his age and nationality, which I perceived as ‘not dangerous’ and which were intended to cool down possible anxiety about the interview, I ask him what his life has been like since he came to Norway as an

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3 Those who may have read my previous analysis of the crimes (Sollund 1999a, 2001) are asked to bear with the fact that I am forced to repeat some of the interviews earlier revealed in order to do this.

4 In Norwegian: Sikring—which was used to protect society against those regarded as mentally insane. It was not regarded as punishment although many persons convicted to sikring were imprisoned. In 2002, sikring was replaced by forvaring (detention in custody) used for presumably mentally sane and dangerous persons. Forvaring may be extended and unlimited in time in contrast to a regular prison sentence. Forvaring may come in addition to a prison sentence.
asylum seeker. In this I intended to give him room to elicit his own story (Hollway and Jefferson 1997:60).

John describes lots of difficulties in which he had his application rejected, which led him to go underground, living with different families, before he finally after 2 years got the residence permit on humanitarian grounds. He was under pressure both financially and by acquaintances from his own country who wanted him to work politically. He started to hear voices and went to seek medical emergency assistance but was rejected there as he was at the social security office. He felt persecuted and wrote letters to all kinds of public instances, to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to UDI (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration), to Norwegian ministries, etc. He explains that these activities left him little time for studies. When he stops his narrative I ask him again: ‘Can you tell me what else happened in the spring and in the summer?’ The intention with the question is both to let him arrive chronologically to what led him to prison, and to let him choose how to do so. He answers: ‘Then I ended up in prison’. In all its lack of information this answer also invited me to inquire why, and I insisted: ‘Then, can you tell me why you ended up in prison?’ The question is narrow in one sense, but still open as it is completely up to him to explain how, and what happened. He says: ‘It is not so easy to tell you. No, I arrived at a point where I saw no light in my life.’

Rather than telling me what happened he initiates a narrative about his mental problems. In this he is open, describing well his paranoid psychosis, and I feel my sympathy grow for him. His openness can be due to the fact that the interview can be a way of asserting oneself (Shütze 1987, here in Grenz 2005:2098). To talk about yourself and your own experiences to someone who is genuinely interested can be a relief. For John it was particularly important to tell me his story, so that I, as he said, could learn from it. In this is also an aspect of redemption. He may have used the interview as an attempt to achieve social reintegration through a desire to help science and thereby to re-establish him as a moral agent (cf. Plummer in Grenz 2005:2099).

He transmits through his experiences the coldness of the public system for refugees, an idea to which I am sympathetic after years of experience as an interpreter for refugees, as well as through research experiences related to this group. John continues to describe how he felt trapped, he had no one to turn to, nowhere to go, he was suicidal and depressed. In a calm manner he describes how he turned all his aggression towards himself, until:

So, then I thought the only solution would be to counterattack—so to speak—I don’t know if it is right to put it this way, but to take revenge on those who were to blame for my problems—so it ended—unfortunately—it ended [pause] with an episode of violence—[pause] which caused another person’s death.

There is another pause in which I let the information sink and give him time to go into more details. Rather than posing the question ‘What happened?’ in order to make him elaborate, I evade the question and ask him a question5 to

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5For reasons of anonymity the question cannot be revealed.
confirm a growing suspicion of who the victim was and in order to facilitate his answer by being concrete (Hollway and Jefferson 1997), thus perhaps encourage an elaboration in either case. When John confirms, I realize fully whom he has killed. I remember the front pages and my own reactions to them which may have been more personal than the theoretical interest such a crime could hold for me as a criminologist. I said nothing to reveal that I now had realized who the victim was as he goes on elaborating on why he felt obliged to kill her as she was part of the ‘conspiracy’ against him. I did not want to stop him from explaining, but struggled with my own feelings. How could this man, this gentle, polite, calm person, have committed such a horrendous crime? The description of the homicide in the press was in stark contrast to the calm man and the surroundings in the hospital, the sitting room and the cake and coffee on the table. John starts talking about the circumstances leading to the incident, until I return to the homicide and ask him: ‘What happened that day?’. John asks me if I have read his files. I say no, and that I wanted to hear his story first. Again I open up for a possibility for him to convey his experience. He seems reluctant, then answers:

No, unfortunately I stabbed her [pause]—with a knife. [Interviewer: At once when she opened the door?] The door was open, the door was completely open, and we met each other in the entrance hall and without saying a word—[pause] to each other, so [pause] …

I take the interview in a loop around the homicide again, during which he answers my question about what he had been thinking during the two days prior to the homicide, by explaining how he gradually came to perceive her like en enemy and a threat, not only to him but to all of those who worked politically in his country. I then ask him: ‘What did you think after you stabbed her?—Did you leave then?’ Posing the first question I identify him as a killer—an identification he avoids confirming as I ask the next less dangerous question immediately. Rather than answering the first question, which I invited him not to do he says: ‘Yes [pause]’. He called the police, realizing that he could not go by public transport as he was covered with her blood; furthermore he said he perceived the police as the only ones able to protect him from his persecutors. He also adds:

I meant I had done my part, now the police could take hand of the rest [of the persecutors]. [Interviewer: Did you think it (the homicide) was necessary?] Yes, I thought I had done the right thing, I thought so.

John was convicted to 5 years of preventative detention in addition to the year he had been in custody awaiting trial. The judge found that he was insane at the moment of the crime.

The interview also revolved around John’ life after the homicide. I ask him: ‘How do you feel about what happened, now that you know you were ill, knowing that you killed her. How do you live with that today?’

John: It is painful, very painful really. Because it is difficult to look upon myself as a good person when I

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He then elaborates on details which I cannot reveal for reasons of anonymity.
remember what I have done ... Because I used to look upon myself as a good person, actually. [pause] Before it happened. So what happened, it is hard to understand, I wish I was without it. So it is painful to live with what happened.

Interviewer: Had you ever committed violence before?

John: No, on the contrary; I was very, very calm, and very good [sniff], actually.

In this John’s narrative fits into the category that Presser (2004:87) in her study defines as ‘return narratives’, in which a distinction is made between the deviant and the new good person. In John’s case this is not a turn from a deviant character to a good person; the deviant act represented a break of who John had always been—good. As the research interview is also a construction of identity, in this John also identifies himself as a morally accountable person, a definition in which I encourage him, saying: ‘So this was a very unnatural thing for you to do?’ I was still emotionally disturbed by the story of the homicide, picturing how he stabbed the victim—until she died. Yet, when he started to tell me about his studies in anthroposophy, and how he thought humans could be spiritually developed and morally guided through studies, and how we are able to learn from our actions, I felt my sympathy towards him grow, even to such a degree that I felt he was a genuinely good person. I will now describe the interview with Yusuf before I turn to the discussion.

The interview with Yusuf

The interview with Yusuf took place in a visitor room (cell) at a prison. He was 30 years old. He came to Norway as a UN refugee and got political asylum. Where John had been mild and apologetic, Yusuf had an offensive attitude in the interview. As with John, when answering my questions about how he was received in Norway, Yusuf started telling me how dissatisfied he was, as he was only offered a little room and had received no medical examination even though he had been fighting in the Iran–Iraqi war and subsequently had spent nearly two years in a Saudi Arabian camp in the desert. As a result of this: ‘We think we need sex, we need to drink, all ordinary things.’ Depicting his own masculinity in the interview, he can also have attempted to restore the power imbalance in the research relationship and intimidate me as a female researcher (Grenz 2005; Presser 2005; Schwalbe and Molkomir in Skrinjar 2005). He proceeds:

So we met girls and we had good contact with them, but then it happened that one who came with me, she accused me of rape. There were some others living in the same place, we were eight Iraqis, so she had sex with them. But after we had intercourse and were done, she went and accused all those who were there [of rape]. And then there was a trial and she said she came with me, and it was OK, but the others raped her. Four were acquitted, but three were convicted together with me’.

7In a previous article (Sollund 2001) I called him Jonathan. To avoid confusion with ‘John’, I here call him Yusuf which has been used before (Sollund 1999a).
My interpretation is that he brought the girl to his room, had sex with her, and next she was raped by his friends in turn. As a result of this I feel my antipathy towards him grow, which as it turns out, will increase as he later on in the interview elaborates on the crime.

[Interviewer: So that is your verdict? (referring to the rape)]. No, I am in prison for homicide and grievous bodily harm. ... But that is what led me to kill, even though I didn’t want to kill, no one wants to take a life, you see? But the system pressures us, three months without a visit in custody with restrictions, no mail, no visits, and when I was released I had nowhere to live, I had to stay four days on the street, so everything was chaos for me, and the only escape I had was alcohol, there was nowhere to go, so I had to go to restaurants and bars, there was nowhere to go.

[Interviewer: You had no friends?] No, I know no one. [Interviewer: But the ones you came with?] No, they have family and their mentality is different from mine, see?

A bit later on I ask him: ‘What happened then?’ He says that he met a girl he knew, went with her home, they played a TV game, and:

I have a brain injury and when I drink it affects me and I lose all control. I never lost it before, but now I lose ... You see, so I lost all control and killed. So I have forgotten everything that happened.

I ask him: ‘Did you forget everything? [referring to the homicide]’, to which he replies that the last thing he remembered was that he was out drinking and that he had beaten somebody (else). So he is taken into custody for grievous bodily harm, and then two months later, while still in custody, the police come and ask for a blood sample and he is arrested for homicide. He adds: ‘I got no offer of seeing a psychiatrist.’ And he proceeds, intensely, while crunching his plastic cup:

So I go mad, I go mad ... it wasn’t only me, it was all those who were there [in prison]. This cup, when you crunch it, it bursts, because we are humans, we carry hatred, we carry hatred, see? So it happened to me [pause] I don’t know.

During his narrative I feel that while describing his crimes, he makes excuses, blaming the system, blaming the alcohol, blaming a brain injury. Thus he is presenting these as forces beyond his own control, indeed as uncontrollable forces. Consequently he casts himself in the role as a victim, not only of the claimed injury, but also of the ‘system’. This is not unusual for offenders talking about their crimes (Enosh and Buchbinder 2005). But at the same time, Yusuf expresses such a degree of aggression and hatred that I nearly find myself perceiving him as a personal threat in the confinement of the narrow visiting room.

I ask Yusuf whether he agreed that he had raped the first victim, something which he denies, claiming that it was the

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8He was convicted for the rape as it appears from the quotation above.

9In his file was the transcript from the interrogation of his brother. When I had read that, I knew that he did not confirm Yusuf’s story about the brain injury.
other men who were guilty. I then confront him; ‘So you did nothing to prevent them?’ He answers: ‘I cannot hit anybody.’ And he adds:

And she came from the street [she was a prostitute], and they refused to pay her; that was all. She went to the police because they didn’t pay her. And they call it rape! For 1000 kroner, four persons were convicted to three years in prison only for 1000 kroner! All she wanted was money, nothing else. So she went to the police because she didn’t get paid, and it is like going to a shop and refusing to pay. It is the same thing. [Interviewer: Except that it was her body …] Yes, but it is the same, because she needed money for drugs, and the shopkeeper needs money to survive. It is the same thing.

My feeling of resentment against him is increasing through this comparison of rape committed by four men against a woman, to shoplifting. This way of downplaying his role and the crime is parallel to other researchers’ experiences when they try to inquire about violent acts (Presser 2004; Enosh and Buchbinder 2005:611; Presser 2005). I felt this minimizing of her as a victim and his total disrespect for her worth and integrity were repelling, and that the way he defended that he did not help the rape victim because he is ‘unable to hit anybody’ was of little credibility and a poor excuse, something which increased my resentment. Maybe for that reason, I did not enter further into the subject. Rather I ask him: ‘What was your sentence?’ He replies that he got 21 years in prison, the maximum sentence in Norway.

We talked about his feelings about the verdict and he said: ‘Where is the system that should help me?’ When I asked him whether he thought he would have killed if he had not come to Norway, he replies that: ‘I don’t think I would have shot anybody’ to which I respond: ‘But you didn’t shoot her, did you?’ ‘No, but still …’ [How did you kill her?] ‘With my hands … and yes, it is tragic. To take a life is tragic.’ It is as if though he anticipates that I will ask him about remorse. The reason for this may have been the unsympathetic confrontational way in which I posed the questions. Thus he adds to confirm that it is tragic. This is the first sign of remorse about what happened, and, invited to follow up, I ask him how he feels about it. He answers: ‘How I am? I suffer every day, inside me I suffer. No one can feel what I feel when I think of … [pause]. But still I am … [pause] angry!’ [Interviewer: You are angry?] ‘Yes with the system here, the judicial system, the police, and the prison’. He elaborates on the strains of imprisonment, and his anger against the reception system [for refugees]. His emotions are reflected in his body language: his fists are clenched, his eyes and face are cold. He leans forward, looking into my eyes, saying:

One day will come, because the prison creates hatred, creates real hatred, and one day it will affect innocent people. That is the problem. … Someone breaks the law, you see, someone needs help. There is a reason for it. They need help, if they don’t get any they will not be any better. Many want revenge; I am one. [Interviewer: But when you say revenge … on whom? … how will
you do it?] Somebody ... no, it will not affect innocent people, what happens, happens, you have to do it, you see. [Pause] [But will you ... (Interviewer doesn’t finish the sentence)]. I don’t know, I don’t know, you see. ... Because hatred is like fire. If you extinguish the fire once it starts burning ... you will not get problems ... but if you pretend you don’t know, the whole house will burn down.

Yusuf describes himself as one leading an unstoppable quest for justice, in which he is cast into circumstances which lead him to fight and take revenge on the system. Correspondingly Presser (2005) found in her interviews with violent offenders that:

Whether one claimed moral reform or moral stability [...] the protagonist was cast as a hero in his own life, battling adversaries in an on-going struggle. Particular adversaries varied. [...] The criminal justice system was by far the most common adversary identified (Presser 2005:2075).

Later on in the interview I ask Yusuf what would have been the fair consequences of what he did. He answers:

They could have examined me and treated me. Not 21 years! ... Lock me up and create hatred in my heart, and one day I will blow up Oslo City [a mall] or somewhere else. Maybe not here, I can meet Norwegians all over the world!

At this stage of the interview I must admit I thought: ‘I hope this man will never be let out again. He is a dangerous man.’

Discussion
Both John and Yusuf had committed homicide. The fact that they had committed serious crimes made the interviews difficult, as the topics of the interviews were both very sensitive and personal. Still my reactions to them, as informants and as human beings—as men—were divergent. One reason may be simple: some people you feel sympathetic towards, and, regardless of who they are, others you dislike. Such emotions may be intuitive rather than rational and may have interplayed in the interviews, but may be harder to analyse. Rather I will focus on what happened in the interview process, how the informants presented themselves, especially what was said (and left unsaid) and how this influenced my emotions. As suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (1997), absences and avoidances may be as significant in an interview as that which is said. Furthermore I will discuss how my emotions may have interplayed with the data produced in the interviews.

The ‘ideal informant’ is the remorseful killer?
Both of the informants told stories of neglect from the reception system for refugees, and this was also part of what the analysis showed built up to the situations which led to their crimes (Sollund 1999a, 2001). However, my reactions to their descriptions of their situations prior to the crimes were different. In John’s case I perceived the description as a legitimate explanation, a situation to which I could sympathize as this was a reality I had often observed through previous work experiences.
John’s narrative had the character of confession, and as he explicitly said that he wanted to help me, and that his narrative could be valuable for the project, it also had a character of redemption (Grenz 2005:2098). Still his narrative (and that of Yusuf) was as much as a confession a narrative produced by the circumstances (Presser 2005), and not only his internal attitudes to the offence. In his description John did manifest himself in what I interpreted as a modest, quiet, and earnest way, not only as a victim but also as a victim worthy of my sympathy. Through his behaviour he rather contrasted with than conformed to his crime. And maybe also because this was an unexpected contrast, the interview contributed to the identification of him as a good person, in my eyes, but it also likely helped him to restore his self-perception which had been distorted because of the homicide (Presser 2004). John acted in correspondence with expectations and previous findings of how killers expiate their sentences, in which expiation is different from and comes in addition to ‘doing time’. It is an emotional and existential state of mind, rather than just a practical arrangement of imprisonment (Leer-Salvesen 1988).

Before telling me about the homicide John first asked me whether I had read his file. I assume that would have been easier for him, then he would not have had to explain and return to the homicide and his own painful emotions at the time. This clearly indicates that he would have preferred not to speak of it and that he felt ashamed of what he did, an impression which was enhanced by the way he looked down when telling me about it, rather than looking me in the eyes (Heller 2003). This may also have strengthened my impression of him as a remorseful killer seeking penitence.

While in the case of Yusuf my reaction was that he was unduly ‘blaming’ the system; rather than explaining, he complained, which I intuitively interpreted as if though he was not taking responsibility for his actions. This was despite the fact that his experiences as a forced soldier, and as a refugee in Norway, objectively should be perceived as likewise deserving my sympathy as those of John. Still he did not produce that feeling in me. Rather than receiving my support in identifying him as an ‘innocent victim’, his blaming, his body language, and anger contributed to identifying him as a dangerous perpetrator in my eyes. In contrast to John, Yusuf did not assume the same position of guilt, shame, and remorse. Yusuf’s behaviour supported his depiction of his own masculinity pointing to his ‘need for sex’, and also emphasized that his crimes, the rapes in particular, were gendered and required power and physical strength. His behaviour during the interview did not contrast with his crimes as was the case with John. Consequently my antipathy produced by the character of his crimes was reinforced by his conduct and attitude. Where John downplayed his masculinity by his apologetic and shameful attitude, Yusuf enhanced his. This also served to enhance the gender difference between us: him as an actual and therefore even more potential rapist, me as a potential victim.

Still both of them expressed that it was painful to think of what they had done. This is what to be expected from a killer: it is (should be?) painful to think
of the fact that you have caused an innocent person’s death in a brutal way (Leer-Salvesen 1988). Such expectations may have influenced both of the informants’ decision to say they regretted it, as most people are extremely distressed by the prospect of shame, and will abort or downplay a shameful story-line rather than continue in a difficult telling (Owens 2006:1167).

Both John and Yusuf sought to manifest themselves as moral agents; John by making a distinction between himself as ‘good’ and the homicide (Presser 2004); Yusuf by adopting various strategies: the interview was an occasion and forum suited to manifest his identity as a victim of the system, in which he may have hoped for my support due to my authority as a researcher. This may also have been the result of the situation in which an attentive female is asking questions about ‘forbidden’ topics to a marginalized man (Skrinjar 2005:111). Through the claims of the head injury he manifested himself as the hero; and a victim also of war, something which again emphasized his role as a man. He did not accept identification as a killer.

Heller says that: ‘The eye of the Other functions as moral authority’ (Heller 2003:1020). John did give me the impression, through his conduct and presentation of himself and the homicide, that he perceived me as entitled to have this function as moral authority. He emphasized the importance of telling me his story, and this may have been a conduct that I unconsciously regarded as legitimate. Consequently I ‘rewarded’ him with my sympathy as I again perceived him as the remorseful killer. Thus I regarded John as earnestly regretting his crime, despite the fact that he was psychotic at the time, and consequently was not held accountable and thus convicted to preventative detention, not a prison sentence. Yusuf, on the other hand, quickly turned to talk about hatred. It was as though he said what would be expected of him when he said he suffered, while his real feelings, to which he kept returning, were hatred and revenge. In this he provoked my dislike.

However, it is possible that Yusuf’s anger was not signalling an attempt to escape shame:

[In summary] threats to the self, be they direct […] or more indirect and symbolic (for example, attacks on self-presentation) will stimulate basic defensive emotions such as anger and anxiety’ (Gilbert 2003:1208).

According to Gilbert, shame is a warning signal that one is activating negative effects in the mind of the others, like anger, disgust, or contempt. Furthermore, shame is an involuntary response to the awareness that one has lost status and is devalued (Gilbert 2003:1219). Yusuf’s anger and hatred may have been an expression of shame. This I failed to recognize. Rather I was provoked by his anger and blaming the system. Still, his minimizing can, as much as being his honest perception of the incident, have been the result of evasion to avoid shaming by me. As Owens says, the issue of judgment, which is central to shame, is a subtext in any interview (Owens 2006:1166).

During the interview with Yusuf, I felt utterly uncomfortable. Not only can field-work in general be accompanied
by psychological anxiety and management of self in the presence of informants (Berg 1988; Shaffir et al. 1980 in Ramsey 1996), these emotions were severely enhanced by the character of the interview. My resentment against Yusuf may also have been provoked because I unconsciously interpreted his behaviour as that of a person who does not follow normal rules of conduct in social interactions, in the sense that he did not even try, or try enough to present himself as a morally accountable person. Goffman (1992) says that as presenters, each and every one of us may not be as concerned in following norms, as of giving the impression that we do. As Owens says: ‘Narrative becomes identity as publicly realized’ (Owens 2006:1161). To act as a morally accountable person may be perceived as responding to regular social expectations in society. My perception was that Yusuf did rather act out the role as the dangerous convict through his display of anger and hatred. From another cultural perspective though, his desire to take revenge on the system could be perceived as morally acceptable and even as a sign of honour.

Nils Christie (1986) has showed that the ideal victim is the old lady on her way home during the day-time after taking care of her sister. The typical victims, the male drug addict and the young man provoking a fight, are not ideal. Much in the same way it is likely that my sympathy towards John was provoked by the way he expressed his remorse: quiet, honest, morally accountable, and eager to redeem himself (Grenz 2005:2098). In this he was the ideal killer. An ideal killer would be the one killing in defence of someone or oneself. The fact that many killers feel they kill in defence of the primordial Good (Katz 1988:18) does not make them ‘ideal’ in my definition of the term here. It must also objectively be judged as such, for example through an acquittal in a court verdict. An ideal killer would highly regret the circumstances which made him one, and would also take the blame. Through the way he presented himself, with his efforts to improve morally through his studies, with his remorse, with his shame—bowed head, downward glance (Heller 2003)—with his openness, John also became the ideal informant.

Yusuf, on the other hand, put more blame on ‘the system’ than on himself. And he did not present himself as remorse- or shameful, rather he presented himself as a vindictive person full of hatred and indirect threats. Physical expressions of anger, staring eyes, clenched fists, etc., versus John’s friendliness, calm, and reflection most likely affected my emotional responses to Yusuf. He did acknowledge that he committed homicide. He did not admit to have taken any part in the gang rape. In his minimizing of this offence he implied that he and his co-offenders were in the ‘right’ to take advantage of a woman because they ‘needed sex’, thus confirming masculine hegemony and power. He minimized the act of violence against the woman on the street, saying that as long as she got state compensation as a victim of violence, it was no problem. By adopting techniques of

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10 According to the verdict and the testimony from the victim, he orchestrated it and even benefited financially as he took money from the other men involved for letting them rape the victim.
neutralization, the denial both of the injury and the victim(s) (Sykes and Matza 1957), he attempted to alter the identity as a violent offender. By comparing rape to shoplifting he reconstructed himself, not as a conspirator to rape, but to simple theft. Consequently he was not an ideal offender, something which may have been reflected in his verdict, as it shows that the judges had the same impression of him as I. Assuming the verdict established the truth, he was not honest in the interview about the crimes he was convicted for; it is thus also hard to see him as the ideal informant, although his evasions of the truth may provide interesting data in themselves (Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Gadd 2004). They may for example indicate denial in order to avoid the change of perception of self.

How does the researcher’s influence in the interview situation damage or enhance the quality of the data?

Emotions like sympathy and antipathy were awakened in me by the informants’ attitudes and narratives (as I may have produced corresponding feelings). The question is: How did these feelings affect the informants and the data produced? The sympathy I felt towards John likely tinted the social interaction in the interview process in a positive way, by producing confidence. Confidence has been claimed to be a prerequisite for ‘good data’ and rapport in the interview situation (Harding 1987), and special techniques can be adopted to achieve this (e.g. Kvale 1992; Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Gadd 2004). If sympathy for the informant is a prerequisite for confidence, then the ideal informant is the one provoking sympathy as he will influence the researcher’s effort and success in making rapport. Consequently John was one, while Yusuf was not. If this affects the interview interaction, it also likely decreases the power balance (Owens 2006:1166), even though who is in power in the interaction will shift. An interviewer who does not feel sympathy towards her informant—consciously or unconsciously—may risk acting out the researcher’s power position in an inappropriate way. The degree will depend on how good an actress the researcher is.

In the aftermath of the interviews, I perceived the interview with John as the best, rich in data, and insightful, while I saw the interview with Yusuf as less productive. I also felt that I had avoided vital questions in the second interview. Still in the interviews I did, for example, pose the very unpleasant questions: ‘What are you convicted for’, ‘How did you kill her?’, and ‘How do you feel about it [the homicide]?’ While the two first questions are concrete but unpleasant, the third may, at the same time as it is an invitation to elaborate on emotions, also be claimed to contain moral judgment implying guilt, and that the homicide must indeed be hard if at all possible to live with. In that context, it is not surprising that Yusuf answered that he suffered, but maybe surprising that he answered the question at all as he could experience the question as an accusation. His answer may have been

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11This implies that the court believed in neither his claims about amnesia during the homicide, nor his explanation about the rape.
12See Duncombe and Jessop 2002:108–112 for a discussion on the ethics of ‘doing rapport’ in the qualitative interview.
the outcome of the human desire to be accepted by the Other (Heller 2003).

The interviews are of approximately the same length (22 single-spaced pages). Still the interview with John lasted half an hour longer, something which illustrates the pauses and the pace of the conversation. Silence in conversation can be soothing if the silence is between two or more persons who share a common understanding, closeness, and trust. Silence may also be disagreeable and loaded with words and unspoken meanings. The second kind of silence may be used deliberately as an interview technique as silence between strangers is more likely to become unpleasant—an unpleasantness which may be remedied through speech. Consequently, if the interviewer maintains silent pauses the interviewee may feel not only encouraged, but also obliged to speak in order to fill the gap and establish understanding. The pauses produced in the interview with John were to some degree the product of the difficulties of the themes, but were also accepted by me as a means of making him talk. Even though the silence was produced between strangers and within an emotionally loaded interview, I did not experience the silence as unpleasant or awkward. John said at the end of the interview that it had been good talking to me. This may indicate that even he did not find the silent pauses unpleasant, although for him they were likely far more challenging, as he had the key to break the silence—and the key was related to the homicide.

Silence in relation to crime has been treated theoretically (Hallsworth and Young 2008). In maintaining silence about a crime, the emotional and practical impact of facing it may be reduced at first sight, both for the victim, the offender, and the bystander. By talking about the crime, and putting it into language, the incident is constructed and reconstructed (Searle 1995), as are its emotional consequences and the identities of the perpetrators (Presser 2004) as killers, rapists, victims, or ‘good’.

It was hard both for them and for me to go into detail about all issues that were raised in the interviews, although some were less sensitive than others. The questions about the first months in Norway could implicitly be interpreted as an invitation to explain the reasons for the crimes. These questions were not necessarily so sensitive through the ways in which they were formulated, which also gave the informants the opportunity to criticize the authorities for their refugee regime. As a contrast, the questions about the crimes themselves did to a lesser degree offer these possibilities as in the crimes the informants were central as active agents. In this they were confronted.

Before the interviews I was determined not to act in a way that could disturb the flow of the conversation or even disrupt it. Consequently, the interview represents a challenging control of the presentation of self (Goffman 1992) in which it is crucial not to offend the informants (Ramsey 1996:137–138). Despite my academic training as a criminologist and my experience as an interviewer, I cannot rule out that my feelings were similar to those of anyone confronted with terrible crimes, and also exposed. It seems that not only the informants but also I avoided the most difficult subjects. The loop I make...
around the homicide in the interview with John shows that I tried to avoid the emotional distress it entailed to go into details about it. As Knowles (2006) describes, the researcher can rationalize her own emotional resistance in the interview situation if it is experienced as difficult to cope with, and try to avoid difficulties that the interview situation provides. In John’s situation difficulties may also have been provoked by my empathy towards him. His pauses signalled that the topic of the homicide was emotionally distressful for him to speak about, and consequently I allowed him—at least temporarily—to leave the subject. It is possible that because of the sympathy I felt for him, I did not go far enough in pressuring him about his feelings when he committed the crime. Even though the difficult questions are in the interview guide, I still managed to avoid the question of how John felt during the stabbing, by adding a second question which invited him to leave the first unanswered.

In contrast, the interview with Yusuf was not characterized by silenced pauses. I tried to avoid topics to a lesser degree, but confronted him in my determination to come to terms with what he was convicted for. Still I make a loop around the rape. I likely also avoided going further into these crimes to protect myself because I found them so repelling. Furthermore, I felt at this stage that by going further into the rape, my resentment would be clear to him. This could put the interview at risk, as he could be reluctant to answer further questions or even decide to withdraw his consent. In this, he was in power.

I did not sympathize with him. In his case we were not two producing a collaborative effort to avoid the distressful topics in the interview. Still I am not sure how much I gained from it. He—and I—spoke far more freely about the incidents, but when I examined his files I found that one way of evasion could be his minimizing of the offences. His evasions can also have been to protect himself, both from reviving the incidents, and from my judgement, as my eye represents the eye of the community from which he was excluded by his prison sentence. In this, rather than succeeding in making me agree with his interpretation of the incidents, he made me suspect that he was not conveying the truth.

I cannot exclude that the reason for my antipathy to him was connected to my own ‘baggage’ (see Knowles 2004), being a woman and as such a potential victim of sexual abuse. As a woman I also carry experiences of sexual abuse of which I was reminded when picturing the gang rape (cf. Stanko 1990). I could easily imagine how the victim felt, and Yusuf’s minimizing of the crime and the victim enhanced my sympathy for her and my antagonism to him. My attitude to him may even have been tinted by stereotypes of Muslim men, as ‘Muslim monsters’ created by the mass media (Sollund 1999a; Vestel unpublished), which he in fact reinforced by his statements. In Yusuf’s case, my sympathy for him as a refugee and a forced soldier did not outweigh the antagonism produced in the interview in which his aggressive behaviour emphasized that he as a male could be a threat, which was confirmed through his presentations of the crimes.
Antagonism as data-productive?
My attitude towards him in the interview may be defined as antagonistic, and my questions are confrontational: ‘Did you forget everything?’ ‘So you did nothing to prevent them?’ ‘Except that it was her body …’ Despite my resentment at Yusuf’s attitude and his crimes, I tried to remain ‘neutral’. Although lots of researchers speak of the necessity of producing confidence and rapport in the interview situation (e.g. Harding 1987; Grenz 2005) to produce quality data, this is not necessarily the case in all aspects. For example, in John’s case, it is possible that more information could have been revealed if I had been more confrontational in the interview. Still John’s version of what happened corresponded to the information in his files. This supports that he was ‘honest’ in the interview.

But even in Yusuf’s case I did get a pretty clear picture of what he had done. It is even possible that my critical attitude to his presentation of the incidents may have been productive, in the sense that I got a picture, albeit vague, both of the crimes he had committed, and in his excuses for them—information that became important in the analysis of the crimes. In her argument for a confrontational approach in the interview, Knowles (2006) mentions Wellman’s study which revealed that a Black Panther member of the research team produced the best data from interviews with white informants precisely because of his challenging interview style. Thus: ‘Antagonistic research relationships should be more widely acknowledged and deployed in sociological research’ (Knowles 2006:395). Antagonism may be produced both by what the researcher says, and by her attitude as played out in body language and face expression. How my antagonism to Yusuf was expressed or suppressed in the interview depends on my acting abilities, which I find hard to judge.

There is a difference between a deliberate antagonistic attitude adopted to generate data, and antagonism produced by the informant’s attitude or the topic of the interview. The first may produce (negative) reactions and make the informant lose control and thereby reveal more sincere opinions and experiences, but it can also make the informant withdraw from the interview. Furthermore, if the researcher confronts informants with diverging perceptions of their narratives it will also enhance the power imbalance in the research constellation in which the researcher is in charge and with the power to frame the questions and accept or reject the narratives given. To deliberately put informants in an unpleasant situation by making them lose the ability to control their self-presentation may be defined as unethical, even though it can entail ‘good data’, not least for those informants who do not feel free to withdraw consent. Neither was it a deliberate strategy from my side, but it illustrates that during some kinds of interview it is hard to be, and hard to pretend to be, emotionally untouched and that this in turn will affect the interaction in the interview.

Conclusion
The qualitative interview may be demanding and distressing, both for the informant and the researcher, and more so if the topic of the conversations is of a sensitive nature (Sutton and Shurman 1988; Ramsey 1996; Grenz 2005;
Knowles 2006; Owens 2006). This emotional distress should be elicited in research in order to enhance readers’ possibility of evaluating the findings, and the circumstances under which data were produced (Berg 1988). This is particularly important for criminologists who often will do interviews with offenders of serious crimes, and even more when a female researcher is conducting interviews with male offenders with female victims. Gender may interplay in the generation of data both due to gender roles (e.g. Grenz 2005; Skrinjar 2005) and due to the researcher’s emotions related to crimes with female victims.

In this case, antagonism was produced by resentment connected to gender differences because as a woman I could identify with the informant’s rape victims, and consequently to a lesser degree attempted to create rapport to Yusuf. Rather, as a consequence I adopted a more confrontational style in the interview with him than with John. To judge by the transcripts it is dubious which approach will produce the richest data, the sympathetic or the antagonistic, although judged by my emotions in the aftermath of the interviews, the sympathetic approach entailed the most comfortable emotional setting for the interviewer, and likely also for the informant. This interview was maybe as a consequence of rapport also the one that made the strongest impression on me.

It also became evident that my capacity for feeling sympathy for the informants affected the ways in which I posed the questions, and consequently the data generated through the interviews. This was because of the attitude of the informants, both towards their own actions, as well as towards me. When the informant adopted the position of a remorseful offender, this was in accordance with normal social standards in which one is expected to present oneself from an acceptable position (Goffman 1992; Owens 2006). When the informant did not apply such standards, my response was antipathy and antagonism.

As mentioned, I decided not to read the informants’ verdicts before the interviews, in order to avoid prejudice. Efforts to avoid prejudice against informants may be praiseworthy; however, it is possible that the emotional costs of the interviews could have been reduced, both for me as well as for the informants, if I had read their files in advance. Ramsey (1996), Knowles (2006), Owens (2006), and Sutton and Shurman (1988) show that both researcher and researched may feel deep emotions during the interview, like frustration, anger, guilt, and sadness—feelings of which many were definitely present in the interviews. Sutton and Shurman (1988:341) also show that emotional strain in the interview process may entail psychological detachment on the researchers’ part—a reaction which makes emotional support to the informant (like sympathy, empathy), and just listening to the informant, difficult. Although I foresaw that the interviews could be emotionally distressing, I did not anticipate that this would bring me to avoiding questions, like in John’ case, nor did I expect the degree of emotions the interviews produced in me. For my part, it is likely that some of these feelings could have been reduced if I had been even better emotionally prepared for the interviews. As it was, I was preponderantly technically prepared by the production of the
interview guide. In fact, as a consequence of the lack of mental preparedness the interview guide was also hard to follow. As stated by Knowles:

There are serious shortcomings in a sociological researcher but they are better recognized and worked through, than repressed and turned into an intellectual rationale that undermines the research. A deeper sense of the ‘sociological’ and ‘autobiographical self’ in research is called for (Knowles 2004:402).

Consequently the value of emotional preparation before interviews with informants of another gender and race, as well as in any interview of a sensitive nature, cannot be underestimated to both enhance the quality of the data and reduce some of the strain the interviews entail.

References


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