RESEARCH ETHICS IN CRIMINOLOGY
DILEMMAS, ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

EDITED BY MALCOLM COWBURN, LORAIN GELSTHORPE AND AZRINI WAHIDIN
Ethical principles and concerns are at the heart of criminological research and can arise at the planning, implementation and reporting stages. It is vital that researchers are aware of the issues involved so that they can make informed decisions about the implications of certain choices. This cutting-edge book charts the changing topography of ethics, governance and accountability for social science research in criminology, contributes to the developing discourse on research ethics and demonstrates the importance as to why research ethics should be taken seriously. Bringing together a range of experts who consider both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this book examines the key issues and challenges of ethical research. Topics covered include:

- the measures in place to ensure ethical research practice for social scientists;
- the relationship between state funding and research findings;
- the challenge of researching sensitive areas;
- the changing face of governance and accountability for academic criminology.

Research Ethics in Criminology is a comprehensive and accessible text that is ideal for students studying criminological research methods. Supplementary material includes key points, chapter summaries, critical thinking questions, key definitions, case examples and recommendations for further reading. This book will provide a thorough grounding in the ethical issues faced by researchers, as well as an understanding of the role and purpose of ethics committees.

Malcolm Cowburn is Emeritus Professor of Applied Social Science at Sheffield Hallam University.

Loraine Gelsthorpe is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

Azrini Wahidin is Associate Dean for Research and Innovation in the School of Social Sciences, Business and Law, Teesside University.
“Research Ethics in Criminology offers a comprehensive insight into the practicalities and difficulties confronted by students and academics conducting research into sensitive topic areas. Drawing on a wide range of expertise the book has been assembled with the needs of students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, foremost in mind and is, without doubt, an essential companion for those studying and researching within and around the discipline of criminology.”

Samantha Weston, Lecturer in Criminology
Keele University, UK

“This edited collection is a timely and significant contribution to the field of criminology and to the praxis of criminological research. The essays in the collection stand as thought-provoking interventions in what is a challenging academic climate. Taken together, they are a ‘must read’ for students, researchers, and anyone else interested in the ethics and governance of social research.”

Jaime Waters, Senior Lecturer in Criminology
Sheffield Hallam University, UK
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Avi Brisman is Assistant Professor of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University, USA. He is co-editor, with Nigel South, of the *Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology* (Routledge, 2013), co-editor, with Nigel South and Rob White, of *Environmental Crime and Social Conflict: Contemporary and Emerging Issues* (Ashgate, 2015) and co-author, with Nigel South, of *Green Cultural Criminology: Constructions of Environmental Harm, Consumerism, and Resistance to Ecocide* (Routledge, 2014).

Kirsten Campbell lectures in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths College, UK. She is currently the principal investigator of the ESRC-funded project, ‘The Gender of Justice’, which examines the prosecution of sexual violence in armed conflict through case studies of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian courts. This project builds on her recently completed study of subjectivity and sociality in international criminal law.

Malcolm Cowburn is an Emeritus Professor of Applied Social Science at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. His research has focused on three areas; sex crime and responding to sex offenders; the management of diversity in prisons; and applied research ethics in social science. He has published widely in these areas. He is co-author (with Steve Myers) of *Social Work with Sex Offenders: making a difference* (2016). He is currently Alternate Vice-Chair of the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) South-West Committee, and has also served on the Social Care Research Ethics Committee and University Faculty ethics committees.

Chris Fox is Professor of Evaluation at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and Director of the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit. He has undertaken numerous criminal justice evaluations and written extensively on new approaches to financing and innovation in the criminal justice system. His most recent book
Contributors

examined the rise of the Justice Reinvestment movement in the US and UK. He is currently writing *An Introduction to Evaluation* (Sage Publishing, 2016).

**Loraine Gelsthorpe** is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, UK. She is also Director of the Cambridge ESRC Doctoral Training Centre and Co-convener of the Cambridge Migration Research Network (CAMMIGRES). Loraine has published widely on women, crime and criminal justice, youth justice and community penalties, as well as on more general criminal justice topics. One recent book is *A Restorative Justice Approach to Family Violence. Changing Tack* (co-edited by Anne Hayden, Loraine Gelsthorpe, Venezia King and Allison Morris). Loraine was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 2009 for distinguished contribution to criminal justice, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2013. She was President of the British Society of Criminology (July 2011–July 2015).

**Evi Girling** is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Keele University, UK whose research has focused on fear of crime, young people and communities, and penal sensibilities. She has used innovating methodologies to explore people’s responses to crime, their demands for order and attitudes towards punishment. She is an experienced ethnographer and qualitative researcher and has developed and delivered qualitative research training for postgraduate taught and PhD level degrees in the Social Sciences at Keele since 1998.

**Simon Hackett** is Professor of Applied Social Sciences and Principal of St Mary’s College, Durham University, UK. Simon’s research focuses on child maltreatment in its various forms and to professional responses designed to safeguard children, as well as adoption and children living in and out of home care. He has particular expertise in the problem of children and young people who present with harmful sexual behaviours and is Chair Elect of the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA).

**Mark Israel** is Winthrop Professor of Law and Criminology at the University of Western Australia. He has published in the areas of research ethics and integrity, higher education and research policy, political exile and migration, criminology and socio-legal studies. Mark has won teaching and research prizes in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, including the Prime Minister’s Award for Australian University Teacher of the Year in 2004.

**Paul Knepper** is Professor of Criminology in the Department of Law and Justice at Central Washington University and Visiting Professor of Criminology at the School of Crime Sciences, University of Lausanne. Recent books include *Writing the History of Crime* (Bloomsbury, 2015) and *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice* (OUP, 2016), edited with Anja Johansen.
Fiona Measham was appointed Professor of Criminology in the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University, UK in 2012. Fiona has conducted research for over two decades across a broad area of criminology and social policy, exploring changing trends in legal and illegal drugs; the night time economy and the sociocultural context of consumption; gender; the regulation and policing of intoxication; electronic music scenes and club cultures; issues of deterrence, displacement and desistance; and broader policy implications. A key feature of her research has been the development of in-situ methods of data collection in pubs, clubs and festivals, a working environment with which she is familiar, having spent her early adulthood working in bars and clubs across several continents in various guises.

Linda Moore is Senior Lecturer in Criminology in the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at Ulster University. Her research interests include penology, youth justice and human rights. She is author, with Phil Scraton, of: The Incarceration of Women: Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits (Palgrave Macmilan, 2014). She is currently working on an ESRC-funded project on the criminalisation of abortion pills in Northern Ireland. Linda is an active member of her local UCU trade union association.

Peter Neyroud served for 30 years as a police officer in Hampshire, West Mercia, Thames Valley (as Chief Constable) and the National Policing Improvement Agency (as CEO). In 2010, he carried out the ‘Review of Police Leadership and Training’ which led to the establishment of the new ‘National College of Policing’ in 2012. Since 2010, he has been doing a PhD, managing a major research programme at Cambridge University, teaching senior police leaders and advising governments across the world. He is a Trustee Board Member of the Internet Watch Foundation. He was awarded the Queens Police Medal in 2004 and a CBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List in 2011.

David Smith was a probation officer before being appointed to a lectureship at Lancaster University in 1976, where he has worked ever since. He was made Professor of Social Work in 1993, Professor of Criminology in 2001 and Emeritus Professor in 2012. He has researched and written on a range of criminological topics, including youth justice and probation policy and practice, as well as on problems of research in social work.

Nigel South is a Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Essex, UK. In 2013 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Criminology, Division on Critical Criminology. With Avi Brisman, he is co-editor of the International Handbook of Green Criminology (2013) and co-author of Green Cultural Criminology (2014), both published by Routledge.
Azrini Wahidin is Associate Dean for Research and Innovation in the School of Social Sciences, Business and Law, Teesside University. Azrini established the undergraduate criminology course at Queen’s University Belfast and was an international visiting scholar at the University of Melbourne. Azrini has published widely on older offenders, women in prison and transitional justice. Her most recent book is *Ex-combatants, Gender and Peace in Northern Ireland: Women, Political Protest and the Prison Experience* (Palgrave). Azrini is the current Chair of the British Society of Criminology Ethics Committee.

INTRODUCTION

Malcolm Cowburn, Loraine Gelsthorpe and Azrini Wahidin

When we first conceived of this book we set out to explore the changing landscape of ethics regulation in the UK as it has impacted on criminology, and we wanted to alert readers to an ever-widening range of challenges. But we also wanted to outline some possible solutions, or at least to give examples of ways in which the challenges have been addressed. The subject of ethics in criminology and criminal justice has certainly gained prominence over the past two decades or so, as concerns about risk in higher education institutions, criminal justice agencies, other public authorities and individuals have prompted ethical questions and recognised the need to establish standards and provide guidance to those with whom they engage.

Thus the book aims to provide guidance to both novice and more experienced researchers on ethical issues that they are likely to face in the course of criminological research. The book charts the changing topography of ethics, governance and accountability for social science research in criminology. It brings together a series of cutting edge essays reflecting the contours of ethical debates and governance (in relation to specific research areas), examining the key issues and challenges of ethical research.

Governance, of course, is about power, and although we do not address this issue in a substantive chapter, we hope that the book will stimulate some thinking about power and knowledge within the academy, and during the process of academic research supervision as well. There is need to be mindful of the way in which there is potential for academics in academic institutions, learned societies and other scholarly activities to shape research directions, include, emphasise or exclude certain forms of knowledge and research methods in teaching the next generation of scholars and in inculcating a value base. A number of contributors to this book recognise the power relationship between the researcher and the researched. But even the power relationship between student and supervisor contributes to the shaping of knowledge and interpretation in a particular way. Indeed, there has been
much less reflection on ‘ethics from below’ than on the implementation of ‘ethical safeguards’ from ‘above’ so to speak. The realities of empirical research and being in the field can involve a good deal of negotiating and ‘ethical manoeuvring’; where is the supervisor to stand? Should the supervisor side with regulatory bodies and limit the research in order to protect the student, or trust the student to take whatever steps are necessary within the broad remit and values of the research, and with a broad understanding of ‘ethics’. Lyng (1998: 222) has argued that ‘[m]any important empirical and theoretical problems taken up in the social sciences can be thoroughly and honestly studied only by placing oneself in situations that may compromise safety and security in a normative or corporeal sense’. Sticking strictly to ‘safeguards’ might thus result in ‘failed fieldwork’ if research is constrained by those safeguards. Yet importantly, universities have a duty of care to their students, and research organisations have a similar duty to researchers. Taking risks can provide a vista to the realities of research participants’ lives, but this needs to be carefully balanced with knowledge of the field situation, experience, and trust in the researcher (Armstrong et al., 2014). Thus we hope that engagement with ethical dilemmas through this book will prompt some thinking about the need for balance; to protect researchers and the researched where protection is needed, but to also challenge new regimes of regulatory ethical control which impose unnecessary constraint. So a key aim of the book is to encourage further reflexivity at all levels, including: regulatory bodies, learned societies, institutions, departments, agencies, research teams, and supervisors and research students.

In each chapter authors have identified key points, key definitions and have provided a brief guide for further reading. Additionally, authors variously use empirical (case) material to illustrate and explore the points they develop. We also hope that the illustration of different ethical dilemmas and solutions within the book will remind readers to be alert to changes in the landscape of criminological research. Criminology does not stand still. Ethical considerations do not stand still.

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