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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS: REFLEXIVITY, ETHICS, EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ethical dilemmas associated with the collection of data from adolescents in involuntary contexts. It explores how ethical principles such as voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence can be applied in research involving marginalized adolescents in these settings, while also examining the role of reflexivity in mitigating power asymmetries and methodological distortions. In these circumstances, underprivileged youth often face systemic power disparities and restricted research literacy, which compromise ethical norms, including voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence. The present study employed a qualitative approach that combined problem-centered interviews, the documentary method, and grounded theory to capture the subjective experiences of vulnerable participants and the broader social dynamics at play. Data was collected from adolescents in settings such as juvenile detention centers and probation services, where participation is frequently influenced by oppressive institutional practices. In addition to strict reflective processes, a continuous consent strategy was implemented to address these issues. Reflective research diaries and interpretative groups were integrated into the process to facilitate the identification of methodological distortions, the monitoring of power asymmetries, and the assurance that participants' concerns were addressed through repeated and transparent communication. The findings suggest that ethical dilemmas in these environments are multifaceted. Despite detailed briefings and assurances regarding data protection, some participants remained distrustful, and their decisions to participate might have been driven more by external pressures than by genuine voluntary consent. Nonetheless, ongoing consent and rigorous reflexivity were demonstrated to alleviate certain difficulties, enhancing trust and augmenting data authenticity. The study emphasizes the need for systematic intervision, external supervision, and specialized training programs to enhance research procedures in these demanding environments. The insights provided by this study are expected to enhance a vital, reflexive ethics framework that complies with existing ethical standards while advancing social justice and scientific integrity in research involving disadvantaged people.

Keywords
Reflexivity; Marginalized adolescents; Power asymmetries; Continuous consent; Research ethics.

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1. Introduction

Qualitative social research allows scholars to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the subjects under investigation, to make marginalized groups visible, and to give them a voice. However, this viewpoint comes with a number of difficulties. One of the main challenges lies in the ethical complexities that arise when working with vulnerable populations. Ethical norms, including voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence, are fundamental to the scientific discourse (Hopf, 2016, 2017; Roth & Von Unger, 2018; Von Unger, 2014), yet their practical implementation is often far from straightforward. For example, social dependencies or unequal power relations can hinder the process of obtaining informed consent (Narimani, 2014). Moreover, engaging with vulnerable youth and establishing trust necessitate nuanced techniques that require significant reflexivity from researchers (Tilley & Taylor, 2018; Woodgate et al., 2017), as these young people, according to the Sinus Institute (Calmbach et al., 2024), are often struggling for social participation and orientation while facing multiple forms of social disadvantage and exclusion. These challenges underscore the necessity of critically reflecting on the researcher's own role and methodological approach. In particular, the concept of reflexivity becomes essential in navigating the ethical and practical dilemmas of qualitative research. Reflexivity is both a methodological and ethical necessity to avoid blind spots and ensure the quality of the research (Kühn & Langer, 2020; Kühner et al., 2013).

While reflexivity involves continuous self-evaluation and acknowledgment of one's positionality (Berger, 2015), *"strong reflexivity"* demands a deeper interrogation of epistemological assumptions and power dynamics (Brehm & Langer, 2025; Kühner et al., 2013). This is particularly crucial when working with marginalized youth and sensitive topics such as sexuality (Lumby et al., 2018; Valentine et al., 2001), where ethical complexities go beyond standardized guidelines. Furthermore, the positionality and subjectivity of researchers influence both data collection and the processing and interpretation of outcomes (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). These complexities illustrate why there is a need for a differentiated engagement with ethical issues far beyond the standardized guidelines of individual disciplines.

This study addressed these problems by employing a multi-stage qualitative research technique, including problem-centered interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) for data gathering, and the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2010) and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1991) for data analysis. Additionally, the researcher participated in an interpretative group to discuss alternative perspectives and minimize methodological distortions.

The central questions addressed by this study are as follows: *How can ethical principles such as voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence be applied in sensitive contexts involving marginalized adolescents? What role does reflexivity play in addressing power asymmetries and dependency relationships between researchers and participants? Which methodological and practical approaches are suitable for sustainably addressing ethical challenges in qualitative research?*

This paper examines selected ethical challenges in researching adolescents in urban contexts, including those living in poverty and within total institutions. Total institutions are understood here, following Goffman (1961), as highly regulated settings characterized by restricted autonomy, formal authority structures, and pronounced power asymmetries, such as juvenile detention centers or youth correctional facilities.

2. Theoretical Framework: Reflexivity as the Foundation of Critically Emancipatory Social Research

Emancipatory social research examines societal power dynamics and promotes transformative processes (Freire, 2000). This kind of research is not conceived as a neutral process but as a politically charged act intended to promote social emancipation. Central to this idea is the continuous, critical reflection of one's research practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), which elucidates the power relations between researchers and the researched (Kühn & Langer, 2020). Reflexivity is of paramount importance, particularly in research involving adolescents situated in vulnerable life contexts, where structural inequalities and biographical disruptions intersect. Kühn and Langer (2020) emphasize that qualitative approaches enable an examination of the complex interplay between individual biographies and societal conditions. This perspective is especially relevant because vulnerable urban adolescents are often subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, such as poverty, social exclusion, and institutional barriers (Swartz, 2011). The significance of dialogical reflexivity in continuously questioning power inequalities within the research process to prevent their reproduction is crucial (Langer, 2018). Ultimately, the insights obtained should inform emancipatory actions (Roffee & Waling, 2017).

3. Methodology

3.1 Field Access

The Youth Probation Service Berlin and the Youth Detention Center Berlin-Brandenburg facilitated access to 16 adolescents aged 14 to 21 years, primarily male, who had been through institutions including residential care, youth detention, juvenile penitentiary facilities, and probation agencies (Wilke, 2023). These characteristics reflect the social and institutional life worlds central to data collection and interpretation.

Access to the field required extensive negotiation with institutional gatekeepers and formal approval procedures, including ethical and professional assessment by the Criminological Service for Berlin Correctional Facilities and Social Justice Services.

Sampling followed a purposive, contrast-oriented strategy across several recruitment waves. Participants were recruited through youth probation services, youth detention facilities, flyers, and street-based snowball sampling, with later recruitment waves deliberately expanding the sample to include girls, younger and older adolescents, and youths without prior institutionalization to enhance analytical contrast.

A key component of the study was the reflection on the power asymmetries between researchers and subjects. These power asymmetries were particularly pronounced due to the participants' institutional dependency, their legal status, and their prior experiences with authority figures, which could potentially influence their willingness to participate and the way they articulated their experiences.

For participants under the age of 18, informed assent was obtained from the adolescents themselves. Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed both orally and in writing about the aims of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their rights as research participants. Particular emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation and on the fact that they could decline to answer individual questions, interrupt the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. Recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the responsible institutions, and special attention was paid to ensuring that participants fully understood the information provided.

With the support of an interpretative group (Mey et al., 2006), alternative perspectives on the collected data were developed to identify blind spots, critically analyze the relationships between the actors concerning existing power structures, and ensure the ethical integrity of the research.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Strategies

The research design integrated problem-centered interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) for data collection with the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2010) and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1991) for data analysis. This methodological combination followed a *phenomenon-driven* logic, as the ethical dilemmas under investigation could not be adequately captured through a single methodological approach but required different analytical perspectives on both articulated experiences and implicit orientations. This combination of methods enabled the researcher to capture various perspectives and collective knowledge structures of the adolescents. The problem-centered interviews allowed the adolescents to detail their experiences, values, and viewpoints. They were used as the primary mode of data generation, providing a flexible and dialogical interview setting that enabled participants to articulate their own relevance structures. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide developed from the research questions, lasted approximately 60–120 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Meanwhile, the documentary method allowed for the reconstruction of implicit frames of orientation, while grounded theory offered a dynamic approach to theory development that is closely linked to the collected data. The documentary method was applied selectively to reconstruct implicit orientations and action-guiding knowledge structures underlying the interview narratives, particularly in cases where explicit statements appeared contradictory or ambivalent, whereas grounded theory guided the systematic comparison, abstraction, and theoretical integration of emerging categories across cases.

Data analysis began with open coding (Charmaz, 2006), through which initial concepts and categories emerged that systematically reflected central aspects of the research process (e.g., trust-building, reciprocity, and the conscious self-disclosure of the researchers). Subsequently, the initial codes were refined through comparative analysis and continuous engagement with existing literature. Coding integrated interview transcripts, post-scripts, and selected research diary entries as complementary analytical materials and was conducted by a single researcher following an iterative process of open coding and theoretical refinement.

The ethical requirements of the sampling process were ensured through clear procedures for informing and obtaining consent while considering social and institutional power structures in the sampling process to achieve a balanced perspective. The combination of reflexivity, methodological diversity, and ethical diligence was intended to enable a differentiated portrayal of the adolescents' life realities and to make the challenges of the research process transparent.

3.3 Reflexivity: Research Diaries, Post-Scripts, and Collaboration with Institutions

Research diaries are an essential tool for making the subjectivity of researchers transparent and for reflecting on power asymmetries in the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). In this study, reflexivity was established as a continuous principle from the planning phase onward. The author used a research diary from the outset to systematically record considerations regarding methodological design, collaboration with institutions, and ethical challenges in the research process.

Beyond documentation, the research diary functioned as an analytical instrument to critically examine the researcher's positioning, expectations, and interpretative decisions across field contacts and interpretative group sessions. In addition, the researcher wrote extensive post-scripts after each interview. This allowed the author to capture non-verbal signals, contextual conditions, and spontaneous reflections. Post-scripts thus complemented the interview transcripts by documenting situational aspects of the encounters that could not be fully represented in audio recordings, such as atmosphere, interruptions, or signs of discomfort.

Collaboration with the Youth Probation Service Berlin and the Youth Detention Center Berlin-Brandenburg involved a close yet critically reflective relationship. These institutions acted as gatekeepers to the field, which required ongoing reflexive engagement with their potential influence on recruitment processes, participant expectations, and perceptions of voluntariness.

Special attention was paid to the role of these institutions as gatekeepers and their potential influence on the voluntariness of participation. Such cooperation requires continuous reflection to uphold ethical standards and ensure that participants' perspectives remain the central focus (Silverman, 2015). The interpretative group functioned as a form of methodological and ethical intervision, allowing preliminary interpretations to be critically discussed and revised, particularly with regard to power asymmetries, ethical dilemmas, and researcher–participant dynamics in involuntary institutional settings.

The researcher's long-standing professional experience in youth work and sexual health education informed both field access and reflexive engagement with ethical challenges, while simultaneously requiring continuous critical examination through coding, interpretative group discussions, and comparative analysis to avoid the normalization of institutional perspectives.

4. Methodological Reflection: Ethical Dilemmas in Research

This section explores key ethical dilemmas encountered in the research process, focusing on voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence.

4.1 Ethical Dilemmas Related to Voluntariness and Consent

4.1.1 Challenges of Voluntariness in Institutional Contexts

A central challenge in the research process was the issue of voluntary participation. According to the ethics guidelines of the German Society for Sociology and the Professional Association of German Sociologists (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie & Berufsverband Deutscher Soziologinnen und Soziologen, 2017, p. 2), participation in social science research must be voluntary, fully informed, free from coercion, and based on comprehensive information regarding the aims and methods of the research project. However, in practice, implementing these principles in the field proved to be highly complex due to structural power imbalances and varying levels of research literacy among participants.

The acquisition of participants through social workers at the youth detention center and, in part, through the youth probation service posed a particular ethical dilemma. Due to strict time schedules and security measures, many adolescents were approached based on the recommendations of staff members, which raised doubts about whether they could freely decide to participate. The adolescents were in a dependent relationship with the social workers, whose evaluations are perceived as decisive for important aspects of their lives, such as early release from detention, the duration of probation, education, or employment. Such dynamics may cause adolescents to perceive their participation as indicative of their readiness to cooperate and adhere to social norms, consequently limiting their autonomy. In this context, adolescents likely encountered questions such as the following: What are the consequences of refusal? Will my refusal be viewed as uncooperative? Is participation necessary to be regarded as a "good citizen"? The notion of the "good citizen," as articulated by Foucault (2020), is particularly pertinent in this context, as participation may be viewed as an indication of compliance and a readiness to cooperate. This demonstrates that the choice to engage is not merely motivated by individual interest or curiosity but is significantly shaped by social expectations and power dynamics, especially in involuntary contexts where individuals may feel pressure to align with institutional norms.

4.1.2 Influence of Personal and Social Factors on Voluntariness

Another example demonstrates that similar considerations may arise even without direct recruitment by social workers. An adolescent who had spent two years in a juvenile detention center and whose mother relies on social benefits to support the household independently responded to a flyer from the youth probation service. This adolescent gave the following explanation:

> *"I want to be honest. I felt a bit uneasy about the whole thing. When I told my mother about this interview yesterday, I said something like, I might as well just make something up and take the 20 euros. She's always suspicious—she doesn't trust what people do, especially when it comes to statistics. That's why I was skeptical when you first started talking about my situation. Are there statistics involved?"*

Despite being thoroughly informed about the aims and conditions of the study, the participant continued to exhibit fundamental mistrust. Such examples illustrate how strongly personal and social factors — such as familial experiences, socio-economic conditions, and a general distrust of institutions — can influence a person's decision to participate.

Although material incentives, such as a payment of 20 €, may diminish obstacles to participation, they also raise the possibility that involvement is motivated more by financial necessity than by genuine interest in the study (Döring & Bortz, 2023; Swartz, 2011). In this context, the researchers' exhaustive disclosure and transparent communication were instrumental in overcoming the adolescent's initial skepticism and distance. It was essential to address the participant's concerns straightforwardly and honestly, given that sociology, as a research perspective, seeks to comprehend and critically discuss social relationships, power structures, and life realities and repeatedly outline the project's procedures and goals. This intensive interaction helped to establish a trusting relationship that motivated the adolescents to engage in the interviews. This disclosure process underscores that even in contexts involving seemingly voluntary participation, mediated independently, the quality of the relationship between researchers and participants is crucial for creating conditions conducive to ecologically valid data collection.

4.1.3 The Problem of Material Incentives

Material incentives such as the 20 € payment before the encouraged participation signaled to the youths that they would receive the payment regardless of their responses, but it also raised ethical questions. While such incentives can lower barriers to participation, they can also have problematic effects. In several cases, incentives were even negotiated during the interviews. For example, one participant suggested that he could refer to additional friends if they each received 5 €, and he, in turn, would receive a referral fee of 15 €.

As noted in the research diary following the interview, the participant stated: *"Here, my buddy would also take part, even for five euros. I could refer him to you for fifteen euros."* Another participant repeatedly requested additional compensation during the interview, explicitly linking the perceived emotional risk of the disclosure to monetary exchange. As documented in the interview transcript, he stated:

"Is it going to stay at twenty euros, or will it be increased? I'm noticing now that this is really private—it goes straight to the heart."

As Döring and Bortz (2023) emphasize, material incentives should be developed to encourage participation while maintaining voluntariness. Among vulnerable adolescents, such incentives present a methodological paradox: while they may lower access barriers, they simultaneously risk shifting the motivation for participation away from intrinsic interest toward economic necessity. Swartz (2011, p. 58) explains that, in these settings, the researchers often benefit more from the study than the young participants do. In addition to adhering to ethical standards like voluntariness, this perspective emphasizes the need for researchers to consider the target group's unique life circumstances and systemic power imbalances. Incentives must be created to remove obstacles without compromising voluntariness and guarantee that participants and researchers have a respectful and understanding relationship.

4.2 Reflexivity, Power Asymmetries, and the Researcher's Role

4.2.1 Challenges in Obtaining Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle that frequently presents obstacles in research involving socially disadvantaged young people. This demographic, generally marked by social marginalization and restricted educational access, typically does not understand scientific methodologies and research objectives.

An example from the study illustrates this issue: a young man without a school-leaving certificate expressed concerns that his girlfriend, who reads much more than he does, might discover his responses, for instance, regarding the number of sexual partners he had had in recent weeks. Despite detailed explanations regarding anonymization and data protection, he felt that his information was not sufficiently protected:

"I don't want this to be the end of my relationship with my girlfriend or anything like that. I'm afraid — she reads a lot, and I don't want her to find out who I really am."

This quotation illustrates the structural gap between researchers and participants. The young man could not fully understand the use of his data in an anonymized scientific context despite receiving extensive explanations. These ambiguities result from a lack of trust and a limited comprehension of scientific procedures (Auerswald et al., 2017).

4.2.2 Continuous Consent and its Impact on Data Quality

As Klykken (2022) emphasizes, the consent of participants should not be seen as a one-time act but rather as an ongoing process ("continuous consent") that allows uncertainties to be addressed throughout the research process. In the present case, the participant was re-informed about anonymization and the purpose of the study during the interview. Although this partially alleviated his concerns, it also demonstrated that one-time consent is often insufficient to build lasting trust in contexts with a significant social imbalance between participants and researchers.

The uncertainty encountered by participants in institutional settings can directly impact the quality of the obtained data. This became evident in an interview organized by a staff member of the youth probation agency. The female participant consistently declined to respond to sensitive questions about her former relationships and experiences with residential care and youth services, stating, "I don't like talking about that because I've finished with it," and setting clear boundaries such as "No, I don't want to talk about that," or "That's too intimate – that's my private life." The researcher felt "exploited" despite her reasonable position — she had the freedom to refuse to answer questions—because the 20€ honorarium was given regardless of how the interview went. The young woman found the interview's transparency to be burdensome and instead prioritized subjects such as her pregnancy and a promising future. This was disclosed in a subsequent reflection on the interview. This fragmented result demonstrates the obstacles that may arise in interview scenarios, particularly when there are ambiguities or barriers between researchers and participants.

This case illustrates how distrust and social obstacles can influence the collection of data and their quality. Swartz (2011) indicates that such dynamics frequently arise from power disparities between researchers and participants, necessitating researchers' ongoing reflection on their roles and interactions with participants. Auerswald et al. (2017) and Klykken (2022) underscore that engaging with vulnerable populations requires continuous self-reflection in order to sustain transparency in the research process, foster trust, and mitigate social barriers. This means that researchers must clearly articulate their roles and communicate respectively to ensure that participants feel secure. In instances such as the case of the female participant from the youth probation agency interview, it is imperative to rigorously reassess expectations of participants' transparency to enhance the researcher-participant connection and uphold ethical standards.

4.3 Methodological Strategies for Managing Ethical Challenges

Non-maleficence is a core ethical principle aimed at preventing harm to participants. The following subsections discuss its challenges in research with vulnerable adolescents.

4.3.1 Dealing with Emotional Risks and Secondary Traumatization

The principle of non-maleficence is a fundamental ethical obligation that seeks to prevent harm to participants, encompassing emotional, bodily, or social dimensions (Hopf, 2017).

Adhering to this principle is especially crucial when engaging with vulnerable populations, such as adolescents, particularly those in detention centers and prisons.

Since a lack of freedom and inflexible institutional structures cause emotional strain, these institutions are frequently linked to increased psychological stress and an aggravation of preexisting problems (Sugie & Turney, 2017). Data collection was delayed until after a 10-day stabilization phase to alleviate these stressors and give the adolescents time to recuperate from the initial shock of being placed in custody (Brücklmayer, 2010).

The interviews were crafted to avoid particularly distressing topics, such as sexual violence, in order to minimize the unnecessary burden on the participants. Following the interviews, the youth detention center's social service served as a point of contact in case emotional discomfort developed, and these restrictions adhered to the rules set forth by Criminological Service Berlin, which regulates research ethics in correctional facilities. Despite these carefully planned measures, emotional reactions during the interviews could not be entirely prevented due to, for example, associations between the topics of discussion and other sensitive topics. This demonstrates that the possibility of distressing situations cannot be removed entirely, even with careful preparation and supportive measures. Nonetheless, the researcher employed this approach to adhere as closely as possible to the principles of non-maleficence and to support the participants.

4.3.2 Dealing with Reports of Violence

The following case illustrates the ambiguity of this situation: Rudi, a 16-year-old acting as the leader of a youth gang, described a violent incident that he had initiated. A few days before the interview, an incident occurred in a hip-hop club in which a doorman discovered drugs that Rudi intended to sell and, as a result, was severely injured and hospitalized. This account prompted intense reflections on the role and responsibility of the researchers and underscored the importance of anticipating potential ethical dilemmas and challenges in the research field — preparation that, in this case, proved insufficient. Proactive plans are beneficial for better managing such situations, especially in sensitive and conflict-ridden contexts. The incident was thoroughly discussed in the interpretative group; not only were the personal boundaries of confidentiality considered, but so was the extent to which the principle of non-maleficence should be applied. The option of facilitating access to external support services was considered but rejected in order to avoid blurring the boundary between research and professional intervention.

The researcher ultimately decided to draw the confidentiality boundary broadly such that it was to be breached only in extreme cases, such as if murder was committed. However, this decision led to significant ethical tensions. On the one hand, the researcher felt a sense of responsibility toward the victim of the violent incident, raising the question of whether confidentiality should be breached in such cases. On the other hand, disclosing this information would have jeopardized access to the field and, consequently, the ability to continue the research.

This, in turn, would have undermined the overarching ethical objective of giving voice to marginalized youth and understanding their lived realities.

4.3.3 Managing the Tension Between Research and Responsibility

Another ethical dilemma concerns the extent to which researchers should assume active social responsibility beyond their role as researchers. This tension is particularly evident in the case of a 21-year-old male from an Arab family who had been on probation since the age of 14. He reported that he did not receive social benefits because he could not complete the application process. Although he did not explicitly request assistance, the researchers experienced intense remorse for several weeks due to these circumstances. Completing such an application would have been simple, but it would have transgressed the boundaries between social research and social work. The interpretative group extensively debated this dilemma, with opinions varying from the belief that research should not assume social work responsibilities to the view that researchers in sensitive contexts do have some obligation, especially in aiding marginalized groups. This tension exemplifies the challenge of constantly adhering to the ideal of non-maleficence without contravening research ethics or complicating one's position in the field.

4.3.4 Reflection and Balancing

The provided cases demonstrate that applying the principle of non-maleficence frequently triggers intricate ethical dilemmas. Ethical challenges in the research process cannot always be resolved through pre-formulated guidelines but require continuous reflection — whether through interpretative groups or research supervision/intervision — and a willingness to reassess decisions critically on a case-by-case basis. The tension between maintaining a distanced research posture and avoiding overinvolvement remains a central methodological and ethical challenge, particularly in research with adolescents experiencing social vulnerability and biographical instability. Researchers must critically position themselves and balance the necessary restraint required for reflexive research with the moral responsibility that arises from the lived realities of the participants. Preparation can be enhanced by engaging intensively with potential ethical dilemmas and personal limits in advance. Simultaneously, ongoing discourse among researchers is crucial for contemplating ethical dilemmas and making informed judgments.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, the findings across the three research questions indicate that ethical challenges in research with institutionally embedded adolescents are deeply intertwined with power relations, reflexive practice, and methodological responsibility, thereby shaping both data generation and interpretation. This article examines these ethical challenges in the context of collecting data from and with adolescents experiencing social vulnerability in urban contexts.

The principles of reflexivity, voluntariness, informed consent, and non-maleficence were central to the investigation. The employed research design, which integrated problem-centered interviews with grounded theory, enabled a nuanced portrayal of the complex life realities of this target group. Continuous reflexivity throughout the research process helped to critically question methodological decisions, reveal existing power asymmetries, and minimize distortions. Furthermore, this research demonstrated how the interplay between researchers and participants can be clarified and how ethical decisions can be robustly evaluated within specific contexts.

A key finding is that the voluntariness of participation in institutional settings, such as youth detention centers or probation services, is significantly compromised by existing power relations. Similarly, despite the comprehensive information provided, uncertainties regarding informed consent may have affected the authenticity of the data collected. The approach of continuous consent appears promising for building trust through repeated and transparent communication. The principle of non-maleficence ensured that participants were protected from emotional, physical, and social harm, although distressing situations may have occurred in some cases and could not be entirely avoided.

The practical implications of the study are manifold. The targeted use of research systemic intervision, supervision, and specific training measures can systematically address methodological challenges. Regular intervision sessions allow researchers to identify and critically examine potential biases and power asymmetries early in a peer-review process (Mey et al., 2006). Moreover, external supervision by experienced scholars supports the validation of methodological and ethical issues and assists in navigating complex dilemmas (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Silverman, 2015). In addition, targeted training programs, such as workshops on qualitative methods, reflexivity, and continuous consent, can equip researchers with the necessary competencies to handle sensitive data responsibly and to build trust with vulnerable groups (Klykken, 2022; Tilley & Taylor, 2018). These measures help maintain scientific integrity and foster the sustainable integration of theoretically derived solutions into everyday research practice. However, it is worthwhile to further elaborate on how these solutions can be more effectively transferred to routine practice without increasing the overall length of the study.

The present findings offer important theoretical insights and practical strategies that can enhance research practices involving vulnerable groups. Intervision, supervision, and training programs offer viable pathways for implementing solution-oriented approaches in everyday research.

Ethical Approval: The study was ethically reviewed and approved by the Criminological Service for Berlin Correctional Facilities and Social Justice Services (Kriminologischer Dienst für den Berliner Justizvollzug und die Sozialen Dienste der Justiz; Ref. No. KrimD 45/3/016/15). The study was conducted within the framework of a doctoral project at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. No separate ethics approval number was issued by the university.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, ensuring respect for confidentiality and voluntariness principles.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The material has not been published, in whole or in part, elsewhere and is not currently under consideration for publication in any other journal. The author was personally and actively involved in all stages of the work that led to this article and takes full responsibility for its content. All ethical standards regarding the protection of study participants were met in accordance with the Ethical Code of the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, & Berufsverband Deutscher Soziologinnen und Soziologen, DGS, 2017), established principles of qualitative research ethics, and the ethical approval granted by the Criminological Service for Berlin Correctional Facilities and Social Justice Services.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): The author declares that no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used to support the research process, data analysis, or the substantive development of this article. The manuscript is based on a chapter of a doctoral dissertation originally written in German and subsequently revised in German prior to translation. For the purpose of translation into English, the AI model ChatGPT (GPT-5.3) was used in a strictly instrumental manner. Each translated sentence was carefully reviewed and verified by the author to ensure semantic accuracy and conceptual equivalence. The use of AI was limited to translation and did not involve the generation of original content, analytical interpretation, or theoretical development. All intellectual contributions and methodological decisions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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