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Ethical reflections on sensitive research with young people living in conditions of vulnerability

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1   Introduction

Any research with young people includes ethical and practical questions that need to be taken into consideration, including concerns about possible exploitation, child protection, informed consent and gatekeeper issues (Kellett, 2003). Qualitative research involving young people in vulnerable life situations automatically includes ethical challenges and dilemmas. These challenges and dilemmas help to advance knowledge about and insight into the young people's difficult living conditions. They also draw special attention to the need to handle this knowledge and insight ethically during a research process involving young people. Conducting research concerning young people living in conditions of vulnerability can involve contact with sensitive topics during the empirical process and demands special ethical attention (Powell et al., 2018). In this process, several of the young people formerly placed in out-of-home care tell stories of difficult experiences during childhood, conflicts with parents, or not having contact with parents at all, as well as feelings of loneliness and difficulties in attending school and education.

Inspired by feminist ethics and a situated research ethics perspective, this article approaches several ethical dilemmas and challenges arising from qualitative research with young people in vulnerable life situations. In our article, "crisis" arises when research is conducted on young people over 18 years of age living in different life situations and backgrounds – as young mothers, young adults leaving care, and young people with gang-controlled communities – who should not be stigmatized and not identified. With smaller children, the research process would be different because of their age and the procedures of research application. Thus, the concept of crisis is here based on the methodological aspects of conducting research involving young people formerly placed in out-of-home care.

For a long time, there have been ethical discussions about young people who live in vulnerable living conditions (Bernard, 2013; Conolly, 2008). For instance, many of the young men in gang-related communities are immigrants from the global south who experience problems related to community integration, difficulties with schooling and education, and upbringing in so-called disadvantaged housing areas. Regarding the young women aged 18-23 who become mothers, research has also identified that this group has been brought up in homes affected by parents' difficulties – for example, violence or neglect – as well as by difficulties with schooling and out-of-home placement. Several of the young women also recalled out-of-home placements during childhood and adolescence and had difficulties focusing on schooling and education (Petersen & Kragelund, 2018).

However, research with young people leaving care revealed a variety of experiences. There are experiences of supportive and smooth transitions and overall well-being, but there are also experiences of alienation and discrimination (Törrönen et al., 2018b). There are good reasons why the situations of young people who have the most disadvantaged life situations are important to consider. Yet we must remember that being in care or leaving care does not have only one kind of result.

"Living in conditions of vulnerability" is used here as a term which indicates that nothing is wrong with the young people, and it is not about identifying or stigmatising them. This is about intersectional experiences. For example, young people being raised in disadvantaged housing areas marked by poverty, and often with family members who have difficulties in taking care of them due to abuse or mental illness, are conditions that intervene and present challenges to young people's everyday lives, well-being, and opportunities for sustainable development (Petersen, 2009, 2015, 2018; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020b).

> During one research interview (Petersen, 2015), Hans, a 19-year-old gang member, recounts memories of being teased and bullied by the others in his school. He tells how, as a child, he felt very sad and alone because he had no friends. Furthermore, Hans explains the consequences of him thinking that no one cared for him or understood him. In his late childhood, he developed a violent temper. When he was teased in the schoolyard, he suddenly began beating the others so violently that he did them harm. Hans has repeatedly changed schools because he was expelled for violent behaviour and placed outside the home. He has served time both at a secure institution for young people and in prison. He quakes throughout the interview, and he only calms down when we go outside so he can smoke a cigarette.

This research interview with Hans gives rise to ethical reflections on how we could give young men and women a voice in the research process and, at the same time, respect what are often very sensitive and vulnerable life histories. This demand does not seem to be readily answered in the traditional and explicit requirements for ethical consideration before, during and especially after the research process – particularly the requirements concerning the respect, protection and privacy of those involved. Ethics in social research traditionally concerns moral, legal and professional guidelines related to, for example, the importance of respect, confidentiality and not exposing informants to harm throughout the research process (Petersen, 2018; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018, 2020b; Piper & Simmons, 2005; Swartz, 2009, 2011). These important ethical guidelines need to be addressed in research with young people. However, these guidelines at the formal ethical level should also be discussed from another important perspective that can be called the ethical relational level (Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020a, p. 15). The formal ethical level combines all regulations governing ethical research practice with human beings in the social sciences. The ethical relational level is based on the formal ethical level, but it extends consideration to the research process, including interactions between the researcher and the informant. The ethical relational level includes fieldwork situations that demand ethical consideration (Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020a, p. 15).

The relational level involves doing research with young people in face-to-face situations and, sometimes, using ethnographic research methods that involve collecting data. This level is an important part of the traditional ethical guidelines. It is rooted in how we, as researchers and persons ourselves, are doing research. What are our theoretical premises, and how should we cooperate with young people (see Case 2017)?

The authors of this article represent the disciplines of social work and psychology. We have different theoretical approaches that, nonetheless, have similarities. Both researchers have adopted an approach to adolescents as competent actors in their own lives, acting under given conditions and with certain opportunities. We also recognize the importance of integrating the young people's perspectives on their own lives. In psychological research, this is based on the critical psychology approach (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998, 2005; Markard et al., 2004; Dreier, 2004; Højholt, 2001, 2005; Schwartz, 2007, 2014; Petersen, 2009, 2015, 2017, 2018; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018; APA 2017) inspired by sociocultural learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 2004). In social work research, these ideas are combined with an understanding of reciprocal social work (Törrönen et al., 2018a; Törrönen et al., 2018b, p. 67) that supplements strength-based approaches (Saleebey, 1996) and complementary research approaches that value clients' experiences and views (Mayer & Timms, 1970). Such approaches are based on participatory methods that involve clients in social services that shape their future (see, for instance, Franklin & Sloper 2006, p. 724-725; Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001).

The ethical relational level is connected to the protection of young people's anonymity, but also to safeguarding their relationships with other peers or people who might have power over them when they are relating sensitive details of their lives. We have to especially consider any risk of comprising the anonymity or confidentiality of personal, sensitive, or confidential information provided by human participants. We also must be thoughtful if we involve colleagues or other individuals whose response may be influenced by power or relationships with young people, and if our research requires the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to young people. These concerns are especially relevant when direct and/or indirect contact with young people is involved (see Ethics Application Form, 2015).

Ethical challenges and dilemmas have put severe pressure on the traditional ethical guidelines, demanding the development of new ethical strategies in interactions with young men and women during the research process – especially those relating to sensitive topics (Sieber & Stanley, 1988; McCosker et al., 2001; Powell et al., 2018; Petersen & Ladefoged 2020b, p. 156).

In this article, we first discuss what sensitive topics are in research with young people. Second, we outline our research methodology using four studies as examples of research with young people living in conditions of vulnerability. Third, in a section on ethical considerations on research with young people, we concentrate on ethical strategies. Ethical challenges and dilemmas associated with the traditions of feminist and situated ethics inspire strategies that can help both researchers and young people during the research process. For the present, two key strategies are presented: doing good and taking care.

2   Sensitive topics as ethical relational questions in research with young adults

The concept of sensitive topics is inspired by Richards et al. (2015), who argue that the concept should be understood as referring to topics that might potentially be considered sensitive: for instance, sexuality, drug and alcohol use, family violence and parental incarceration. However, it is also important to address the question of what is sensitive, to whom and why. Richards et al.'s definition of sensitive topics stresses the social dimension of the concept. In the same way, Sparrman (2014) argues that what makes a topic sensitive cannot be reduced to a single factor, but is rather underpinned by multiple, complex relationships between various stakeholders in the environment in which the research takes place.

Likewise, Sieber and Stanley (1988) define sensitive topics as those that are socially sensitive, meaning there are potential social consequences for individuals and groups. Furthermore, McCosker et al. (2001) suggest that a definition of the concept of sensitive topics must be based on context, cultural norms and values. This view is inspired by Lee (1993), who highlights three important types of sensitive topics: first, issues considered private, stressful or sacred, such as sexuality or death; second, issues that, if revealed, might cause stigmatization or fear, such as illegal behaviour; and third, issues related to political danger, where researchers may study areas subject to controversy or social conflict.

As we develop a definition of sensitive topics, it is evident that they point out the cultural norms of a society and the limits of acceptable behaviour. When young people are sharing their experiences and trust researchers, researchers have to be culturally delicate. In our research examples, sensitive topics refer, for instance, to disadvantaged living conditions, poverty, ethnic minority status, inadequate schooling, physical and mental parental neglect, limited familial and community support, homelessness, trauma, health problems, abuse, rejection, experiences of discrimination, violence and crime (Stein, 2011, p. 2409; Kestilä et al., 2012, pp. 600-603; Ward, 2016, p. 107; Zeira et al., 2011, p. 2461; Törrönen et al., 2018c, p. 20).

Here, we do not discuss these sensitive topics as such but focus on ways research teams can help young people deal with these sensitive issues when they arise during the research process. As Sparrman (2014, p. 305) points out in relation to her own research on children and sexuality, there is a need for reflective analysis on the experience of negotiating access. In her opinion, participating reveals a structure of relationships in which fears, responsibilities and assignments of vulnerability are negotiated. Drawing on these considerations, our article mainly considers Lee's two sensitive topics as private, stressful or sacred issues or issues that, if revealed, might cause stigmatization or fear. This division helps us to discuss the ethical challenges and dilemmas associated with sensitive topics in young people's lives.

3 Methodology, method, and design of the studies

The empirical work in our article concerns ethical reflections on four research projects conducted in Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2018. These studies raised several ethical challenges and dilemmas related to conducting research on so-called sensitive topics (Powell et al., 2018). Young people joined these projects as co-researchers, but also as interviewees, mainly within the qualitative research tradition. The research data mainly consisted of individual semi-structured research interviews involving young mothers aged 18–23 (N = 21), young men in gang-related street communities (N = 19), and young adults aged 18–32 leaving care (N = 74).

The empirical research perspective is unfolded with a focus on young people as co-researchers. Holzkamp (1998) uses this term to indicate that the subject should not be included as an object in the exploration, but rather as a co-researcher engaging in the subject's own daily life. In this context, what is important is that participants are not subjected to the researcher's objective and external view, but rather treated as co-researchers in the research process. This means that the researcher as well as the co-researcher are perceived as subjects both actively participating in the research project, but from their individual perspective (Petersen, 2018; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020b).

The methodological approach adopted for our studies can be called participatory research, which is an approach whereby local perspectives, needs, and knowledge are studied through

collaborations with community members – here, young people (see Smith et al., 2010; Gardner, 2018, p. 205; Törrönen et al., 2018c). Therefore, the key issue in this context is to ensure that knowledge of the young people's perspectives, experiences, and actions is captured; otherwise, the knowledge is at risk of being de-subjectified, that is, detached from the subject itself (Dreier, 1997; Petersen, 2015, 2017; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020b). Based on this, it is maintained that knowledge of young people living in disadvantaged conditions must be placed in their social and situational contexts – and not detached. This kind of approach yields non-institutional knowledge about young adults' lives (Campbell & Trotter, 2007). This method aims to create participatory spaces while building dialogue and trust between young people and researchers through participation (see Johnson, 2017, p. 1; Larkins, 2016, p. 16; Larkins et al., 2014a, p. 16; Larkins et al., 2014b, p. 110).

The first research project, conducted through semi-structured interviews from 2012 to 2016, focused on young mothers (N = 21) aged 18–23 and their young children. Some of these mothers had been placed outside of their homes through childhood and adolescence, both in institutional care and in family care, and several of their newborn children were at risk of being placed outside of their own homes (Petersen & Kragelund, 2018).

The second research project (2014–2018) focused on young men (N = 19, aged 16–29 years) who joined gangs in Denmark. In this research project, most of the young men had been placed out-of-home – some of them in daycare centres through childhood and adolescence, and several of them in secured institutions before the age of 18. Out of the young men who participated in the research project that were over 18, most had also been arrested and served prison time, primarily related to so-called gang-related crimes (Petersen, 2015, 2017, 2018).

These two research projects were conducted to gain knowledge about the subjects' everyday lives. They initiated pedagogical interventions that can be prospectively developed as preventive measures based on the young people's own experiences. There was a particular focus on the pedagogical interventions that the young mothers needed to take care of small infants and to prevent out-of-home placements for their young children.

The third study was conducted in Finland from 2011 to 2012 with the help of ten co-researchers who interviewed their peers (N = 50) about their feelings when they started living independently after leaving care. Leaving care experiences included experiences of leaving family foster care, kinship care, treatment foster care, and residential or group care. The questions for the interview were developed with young people using participatory research methods from an EU project: Children's rights in alternative care, from theory to practice: Filling the vacuum through peer research (see Stein & Verweijen-Slamnescu, 2012; Törrönen & Vauhkonen, 2012a, 2012b).

The fourth study was conducted in the United Kingdom from 2016–2018 with six co-researchers who interviewed their peers (N = 24). This research was based on the EU-funded study, Reciprocal Encounters – Young Adults Leaving Care (see Törrönen et al., 2018b). The data set was gathered from the UK following the same methods of participatory research as those used in Finland.

The focus of these third and fourth studies, which contained approximately one year of fieldwork each, was on what can be learned from the perspectives of young people. How could they best be supported through a difficult period? How can their knowledge and skills contribute to decision-making about their future lives (see also Bøe et al., 2015)? The co-

researchers had training days (two in Finland, four in England) devoted to planning the interview schedule, composing interviews, analysing data and writing with researchers.

When applying for ethical approval and planning the start of the project in the UK, we had to fill out an ethics application form from the university, prepare participation information sheets, consent forms, and an interview schedule and apply for approval from the participating local authorities. The UK and Finland represent different welfare states in Europe and have different child welfare services. Yet if the societies and services are very different from each other, the young people's hopes for leaving care services contain surprising similarities (see Törrönen et al., 2018b).

In Finland, co-researchers were paid for each interview, whereas in the UK, it was not allowed by the local authority. Instead, we celebrated with two dinners in local restaurants and always offered food when we had meetings. The interviews took place in so-called pop-up centres while social care workers and researchers were close by. Both countries' co-researchers had opportunities to share their experiences with social care workers after the project ended. Participation information sheets containing the researchers' contact details were shared with the interviewees in case they wanted to be in connection after the interview.

It was stressed that participation in these four studies was anonymous and voluntary, and that the young people could refuse to take part without providing a reason. The young people's names were not reported to anyone. We emphasized that no one would learn what he or she had said unless revealing something that made the research team believe that another young person was being hurt or was likely to be hurt. This did not happen in these cases.

4   Findings: Ethical relational considerations on conducting research with young people

Here, we summarise our ethical considerations at the ethical relational level on two different strategies: a strategy of doing good and a strategy of taking care. Both strategies were visible in our research with young people.

4.1 A strategy of doing good in research

Ethics is often about not exposing those being examined to harm. However, Piper and Simons (2005) raise the point that ethics is also about doing good – conducting research that helps by giving voices to community groups that, for example, live in vulnerable and marginalized conditions. Doing good in research is the opposite of doing harm. It can have many meanings. In our research, it meant that young people could share their experiences by gaining the empathy of researchers and peers with similar experiences. It also meant making it possible for them to feel like important actors that have an impact on other young people's living conditions. These kinds of practices can give young people experiences of equality and being heard (Törrönen, 2018, p. 8). Here, we learned at least three different ways research may do good. First, young people can get a feeling that their experiences have been heard. Second, they might feel like becoming active and trying to help other young people in similar situations. Third, treating young people as co-researchers can teach them research and everyday life or even working life skills.

Emphatic encounters

The research conducted alongside the young mothers, young people in gang-related communities, and young adults leaving care yielded insights into conditions of exclusion and

marginalization – but also, from their perspective, well-being (Dreier, 2004; Petersen, 2018). This is one way to ensure that knowledge of the young people's own experiences is captured in its social and situational contexts (Dreier, 1997; Petersen, 2015, 2017).

> Søren, 22 years old, is one of the young men who has been associated with gang-related communities since he was 13 years old. During the research interview, Søren tells me that he has been living with his mother during his childhood and that he has only seen his father 'now and then'. He thinks he has always had quarrels with his mother, some of them also very violent, until the municipality thought it was best that he moved to a residential institution. During the interview, Søren tells me that it was a good thing for him to move to an institution, especially because it meant that he did not have to quarrel with his mother all the time. In particular, when his mother had been drinking, it was difficult for Søren to be at home, and at an early stage, he began hanging out on the street with his friends, simply for him not having to be at home. He started skipping school and committing petty crimes without his mother finding out. Søren also tells me that ever since he can remember, his mother has been drinking, and that she would scold him for 'everything' while she was drunk. Getting older, as he remembers, he stopped coming home just to avoid them arguing, and still to this day, he keeps his distance from his mother if she has been drinking. For him, moving to an institution gave him a break, and he thought that the pedagogues were 'nice enough'. It was the pedagogues as well who helped him attend school, gain an education, and find housing of his own. (Petersen, 2015)

To give a voice to Søren and the other young people created an opportunity to get behind the young people's stories, including those that pertained to crime and violent behaviour. This largely meant gaining insight into the fact that many of the young people's lives were characterized by social exclusion, difficulties in school and bullying. Many ended up on the streets at an early stage, where it was possible to join communities with other young people who also felt uncomfortable in school.

As researchers, we aim to reach emphatic interaction by listening, showing understanding, and empathizing with participants' struggles. During the research process, we learned that participants felt they were not always trusted (projects 3 and 4). They asked if we really thought they were capable of conducting interviews. Some of them also said that it was nice to speak with us because we do not talk to them like young persons who have been in care. These kinds of sentences tell how they must feel in their normal life experiences. They reflect cultural prejudices that interpret young people with difficult childhoods or youth experiences from a narrow perspective. We also had social care workers in our third and fourth projects who knew the co-researchers and could support them both throughout the process and after it (see also Törrönen & Vauhkonen, 2012b, p. 38).

Peer support and being an actor

Young people wanted to share their experiences to help other young people in the same situations in which they had been or were. This showed that the concept of doing good in research, to a great extent, was actually about helping other young people deal with their difficult and marginalized lives. They showed strong solidarity with their peers and said that they wanted to help others. This was proudly reported as one reason to join the research project as a co-researcher or an interviewee. They could tell that the project did not help them, but if it could help others in care or leaving care, it was worth joining. This can be seen as

their way to have an impact on the project and society in general. This is one sign that they were not only passive recipients but also wanted to be active in society.

When young people interviewed their peers, it allowed them to meet others like them and show empathy for their experiences. This is a type of peer support. The young co-researchers felt that the interviewees could speak more freely to them because of their backgrounds and experiences. Thus, the relation between the interviewers and interviewees was more balanced than it likely would have been with an adult interviewer who had no experience with out-of-home care. Moreover, we learned that the topics they discussed with their peers might sometimes be more sensitive to us researchers than to them. For they had been living these realities, and they related that they had somehow adapted to painful and negative experiences. However, the co-researchers showed anger and disappointment when sharing their own or their peers' knowledge of mistreatment, injustice, and discrimination.

Learning research and everyday life skills

Through training sessions (two in Finland, four in England), co-researchers could learn life skills that were important for their futures – for instance, conveying their opinions, travelling by public transport, collaborating and being on time. Through participatory methodology, young people helped in creating the interview schedule, learned research and interview skills and, through analysis sessions, participated in knowledge production. These discussions gave voice to a wide variety of experiences (both good and bad) with being in care and leaving care.

> 'I think it's interesting and insightful for young people. It helps you to develop and learn new skills. You learn a lot and see how the numbers and statistics are reported.' (Co-researcher, 11 March 2017)

The sessions we had with young co-researchers were usually joyful. We had good spirits and young people were often the most enthusiastic participants. Young co-researchers joined very eagerly in the first year, but afterwards, their responsibilities and life changes took over our meetings. Young adults who joined the projects as co-researchers received a certificate confirming their participation in an EU research project.

> 'I have learned a lot… about myself… I have learned life skills and skills to help me deal with how much I panic plus stress. It made me want to do something with my life even if I didn't always think about it.' (Co-researcher, 11 March 2017)

4.2 A strategy of taking care in research

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that research within the humanities and social sciences is traditionally subject to a number of very explicit requirements related to ethical considerations before, during and after the research process. However, despite ethical considerations, research with young people shows that ethics must be viewed as a continuous process of questions, actions and reflections, as Gallagher (2009) has pointed out. Research with adolescents also helps to emphasize that ethical considerations are an integral part of the entire research process and not just guidelines that can be established before the collection of data begins (Powell et al., 2012; Holland et al., 2010, Petersen & Ladefoged, 2020a).

Very quickly, it became clear to the researcher who interviewed young people that the ethical guidelines she had reflected on before the research project did not at all provide sufficient

instruction when she started an interview – especially once people talked about sensitive topics.

This finding reflects the researcher's struggle: should the researcher interrupt an interview if many emotions occur? Or should she stop the young person so that he or she did not have to recount the very painful experiences of bullying and violence? Was it at all necessary to let the young people talk about these violent experiences in their childhoods? For these are experiences that, for many of the young people, have been and continue to be very painful, and have had an influence on the young people's lives and dreams.

Schwartz (2014) uses the term ethical red flags, which refers to unexpected situations during the research process and demand the researcher's special attention. The ethical red flags emerged in Schwartz's research when she gained access to very sensitive stories about young people's lives; they were used to indicate that the researcher should pay special attention to and take care of the young people relating these sensitive stories. Drawing on Schwartz's (2007, 2014) ethical reflections, the researcher in the first and second projects also used the concept of ethical red flags when an interview began to shift toward sensitive topics. In such cases, the researcher raised the symbolic flag and discussed with each individual whether this was a topic he or she believed we should broach – and if so, what it would mean to the young person to have this opportunity (Petersen, 2018). Soon enough, it became clear that if one of the young people started to talk about difficult childhood memories, the researcher stopped the interview and asked if the young person needed to talk about these experiences. They also asked whether it was a difficult subject to the young person and how the young person wanted the researcher to listen or respond to this part of the interview.

> Hans, who was mentioned earlier, especially helped the researcher to understand that many of the young men and women also felt they needed to talk about their lives and that, at the same time, it felt good that someone would listen to their 'life story'. Hans says that although it was difficult to talk about, it was also nice to be able to tell, and nice that it felt like the researcher wanted to listen to him and understand him. When the interview was completed, she and Hans discussed whether some of his stories about sensitive topics should be left out of the research. Thus, Hans…contributed to …taking care of the young people all the time during the interview.

In the third and fourth projects, red flags were also used during the training sessions so co-researchers could practice how to conduct interviews with their peers. This exercise was used to teach co-researchers to be sensitive when the possible interviewee did not want to answer or found the question too difficult to answer. Moreover, rules about admissible actions in the group were written down to create a safe space to work during the training days. This created a sense of safety, encouraging the young people to participate and be more confident in their ability to solve ethical problems (Balakrishnan & Cornforth, 2013). The aim was to have them practice awareness of sensitive topics; they were to be ready to stop the interview or to move to another question that felt more comfortable. Co-researchers practiced using the interview schedule and the tape recorders. They practiced in pairs, with one person playing the role of the interviewer and the other, the interviewee. The social care workers talked afterwards with the co-researchers concerning how they felt about the questions and what was easy or difficult. The co-researchers, in their role as interviewees, also had a red paper in their hands that they could raise if they felt the question was uncomfortable.

The interviewees were told at the beginning of each interview that they could skip the questions they felt were too difficult or emotional to answer. Some interviewees did use this opportunity. We noticed that sometimes, financial questions or questions about family relations were difficult to answer or created uneasy feelings depending on the background of the young person. Sometimes, the young people did not offer any answers to certain questions, which might speak to their sensitive nature without the individual saying so. In general, young people acting as co-researchers or interviewees seem to take the task very seriously. In most cases, they tried their best to follow the schedule of interview questions and answer each question.

Some feedback we received from co-researchers afterwards (project four, written by one caseworker):

- Welcomed participants and encouraged them to give their views
- Were calm and supportive and contributed to a welcoming environment for young people
- Were confident and engaging with young people
- Were professional in getting informed consent and talking through confidentiality and safeguarding
- Displayed empathy and shared their own experiences in order to identify with others
- Listened to difficult stories
- Contributed to professional discussion and debate

5 Discussion of the findings and implications for social work

Our aim in this article was to discuss ethical reflections on research that uses a participatory methodology to study sensitive topics. The focus was on young people over 18 years of age living in different backgrounds and in potential conditions of vulnerability. Questions about what is sensitive, to whom and why are underpinned by complex relationships between different stakeholders and are based on context, cultural norms and values (Sparrman, 2014; Sieber & Stanley, 1988; Richard et al., 2015; McCosker et al., 2001). Sensitive topics were not discussed here as such because we concentrated on the ethical relational level during the research process with young people.

Especially when doing ethnographic research by spending time with young people in the places where they spend their time, there will be requirements for ethical consideration before, during and after the research process. These considerations are related to respect, protection and not exposing the informants to harm throughout the research process (Piper & Simmons, 2005; Swartz, 2009, 2011; Petersen, 2018). We found it interesting not only to explain the traditional ethical concerns but also to highlight the ethical relational concerns, which are connected to the ways that all parties involved in a research project work and cooperate. As the basis of our reflections, we used empirical work from four research projects in the fields of psychology and social work conducted in Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2018. These studies raised ethical challenges and dilemmas related to conducting research on so-called sensitive topics. We wanted to ethically reflect on how we could give young men and women a voice in the research process and, at the same time, notice what are often very sensitive and vulnerable life histories. We concentrated here on discussing two ethical strategies: a strategy of doing good and a strategy of taking care of the research participants. Both of these strategies might benefit social work practices with young people, especially for those working in out-of-home care or aftercare.

A strategy of doing good is a demanding ethical task. It contains many perspectives, but here we understand it like Piper and Simons (2005), who claim that one way of doing good is helping to amplify the voices of those, for instance, who live in vulnerable and marginalized conditions. Ethics usually demands that we not expose any research participants to harm, but it can also have this kind of positive element. As ways of doing good, we identified emphatic encounters, peer support, learning research, everyday life and even working life skills. Young people who were young mothers, residents of gang-related communities and young people with out-of-home and aftercare experiences shared their knowledge about their living conditions and well-being. However, they also showed a strong sense of solidarity and wanted to help other young people through the same situations they were in. Peer support can develop in someone the view that he or she is not the only one with a certain experience since there are other young people with similar experiences.

A strategy of taking care of research participants is connected to ethical considerations throughout the research process, not only to the process before data collection (Gallagher, 2009; Powell et al., 2012; Holland et al., 2010). One way to take care of research participants is to use ethical red flags, which are used to mark that the researcher or co-researcher should pay special attention when they are used (Schwartz, 2007, 2014). Moreover, the projects wanted to create safe spaces for cooperation. This has helped to participate and create trust in research. For as Crane and Broome (2017) have found in their literature review of participatory research with children, trust is a significant contributing factor in children's and adolescents' participation in research.

It is difficult to evaluate what the consequences of different research projects are soon after the projects end. Usually, organisational practices change slowly. If we only count the types of administrative or organisational changes that occur, we might disvalue important human points of view. It is important that young people are heard, but also that they have the means of making decisions together with adults (Kiili & Larkins, 2016, p. 11). In our work, young people were involved in research about aspects of their own lives, which encouraged them to have some impact on aspects of the research process (Holland et al., 2008, p. 4). Our aim was to do research not on young people, but with them (Smith et al., 2010, p. 1116). It is very important that our encounters with young people give them a positive sense that they are heard and seen. These are ways to show young adults with traumatic life experiences that their existence matters and that there are possibilities for change in their personal lives.

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