Interviewing Criminal Justice Populations without Electronic Recording Devices: A Guide

Phaik Kin Cheah
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, cheahpk@utar.edu.my

N. Prabha Unnithan
Colorado State University, Prabha.Unnithan@colostate.edu

Annie Margaret Sandela Raran
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, anniesandra76@gmail.com

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Abstract

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Keywords

Total Quality Framework, Qualitative, No Recording, Recording Interviews, Crime Research, Protocol

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Phaik Kin Cheah
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak, Malaysia

N. Prabha Unnithan
Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, Colorado, USA

Annie Margaret Sandela Raran
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Perak, Malaysia

We outline a guide for facilitating face-to-face in-depth interviews without the use of electronic recording devices in criminal justice research. It is designed to provide researchers with step-by-step directions they can follow to conduct interviews when recording equipment is not available, not allowed, or not used due to other reasons. In-depth interviews are common in qualitative criminal justice research but require researchers to be highly flexible and adaptive. When interviews are conducted on sensitive issues or carried out in high security environments, recording devices may not be permitted or welcomed. This protocol aims to make the interviews more structured, systematic and organized when electronic recording devices are not used in an attempt to enhance the accuracy and transparency. These guidelines were developed based on practical and theoretical foundations. Keywords: Total Quality Framework, Qualitative, No Recording, Recording Interviews, Crime Research, Protocol

Introduction

Daniels, Angleman, and Grinnan (2015, p. 126) state that there is a need for a clear description of methods in qualitative research for the lack of it "renders results dubious, minimizes the ability to generalize across studies, and drastically limits the capability to replicate study procedures." The purpose of this paper is to present a guide for conducting in-depth (or intensive) interviews face-to-face in criminal justice research when electronic recording devices are not allowed or not used for one reason or another. This study addresses one of the key issues highlighted by Daniels et al. (2015) from their analysis of 38 offender-based research studies: that there is a lack of or no information on the development and verification of the interview protocols and details about the actual interviews and the unanticipated problems those researchers encountered.

Interviews have become an increasingly common form of research data collection (Gubrium, 2012). Carrying these out with criminal justice populations such as police officers, prisoners, parolees, court personnel, and prison staff is challenging and unpredictable. Some interviews with criminal justice populations may take place in high security or high-risk environments such as within prison grounds, prison cells, police buildings and offices, in police cars, or on the streets, where recording equipment or electronic devices are not allowed, not favored, and considered invasive or threatening. Such is also the case when researchers interview criminal justice populations on topics that are sensitive such as criminal behavior, substance abuse, corruption, and gang activity.

In-depth interviews are empirical tools for knowledge creation (della Porta, 2014) that are frequently used as the sole method or combined with other methods for data collection (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) to understand complex processes and causes in criminal justice research (Maxfield & Babbie, 2016). Epistemologically, the use of in-depth interviews in qualitative research is part of the quest to find "*meaning*" or "the social meaning that people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations as well as the meanings people embed into texts, images, and other objects" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 4).

Regular in-depth face-to-face interviews are typically recorded using electronic devices such as MP3 recorders, a smartphone through an audio-recording app, or in some cases a video with audio-recording. Verbatim transcriptions from the recordings enable the interviewer to document "authentic representation of participants' verbal contributions" (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). But without the convenience of audio or video recording of participant interviews, what can we do to capture their responses in a manner that ensures accuracy and precision? From our experience and those reported in previous studies, we have developed a guide for conducting in-depth interviews without electronic recording devices. Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, and Sefl (2009) stated that interviewer training requires two main stages focusing on (1) the content area and (2) interview protocol. This paper addresses the second stage—interview protocol. While we use the term protocol from time to time, this guide is not intended to be formulaic and heavily prescriptive given the great deal of variability in research projects and goals, even if they all involve interviewing.

Literature Review

A growing body of literature has emerged that examines various issues confronting researchers who study criminal justice populations. Much of this literature focuses on studying populations in correctional settings (Farkas 1992; Unnithan, 1986; Watson & van der Meulen, 2018). However, one specific issue that faces researchers who study all criminal justice populations (i.e., the non-use of electronic recording equipment in the course of interviewing their respondents) has been touched on, but not addressed in detail. Our intention in this section is firstly, to draw attention to the few studies that have dealt with this problem. Next, we also hope to gain ideas from other researchers, like us, who have had to face these constraints and the methods they have used to overcome or work around them. With due respect and understanding, we also look at previous studies with the intention of using them as examples to enable us to illustrate that the lack of details in this matter that could limit our and other researchers' ability to learn from and replicate the methods and solutions practiced. Our review of past studies shows that the "recording while not being able to record" issue is a complicated one with no common solution that fits all.

At times, researchers would like to, but were not allowed to, use audio recorders by the authorities granting access. For example, Dirkzwager and Kruttschnitt (2012) reported that some prisons in England did not allow researchers to bring in a tape recorder, although others did. Gallant, Sherry, and Nicholson (2015) were required to obtain special permission to audio-record their interviews in Australian prisons. The unpredictable nature in such high-risk environments (Gallant et al., 2015) may have compelled authorities to impose such measures.

At other times, researchers make the decision to not use audio recorders for one or more reasons. One study reported that although the researchers were allowed to audio-record the interviews, the prison authorities required a staff member to be present during every interview (Vanhouche, 2015). Because the presence of the prison staff affected the interviewees, the researchers decided to conduct informal conversations instead, without the presence of prison guards to draw more accurate responses (Vanhouche, 2015). In another study, researchers who interviewed correctional healthcare providers decided not to use audio-recording equipment

and conducted the interviews by phone to address the issue of social desirability (Clark, White Hughto, & Pachankis, 2017). Meanwhile, Gallant et al. (2015) gave a choice to former convicts to have the interviews electronically or manually recorded for the purpose of protecting their identity.

Apart from the reasons discussed above, researchers may also have participants who may not consent to using tape recorders during the interview, equipment failure or other technical problems such as disturbances resulting from ambient noise or poor recording quality. Regardless of the reasons, all researchers are concerned about the quality of the data collected from these interviews. Previous studies have discussed solutions that were implemented. Extensive manual note-taking was practiced when an audio-recorder was not permitted or not used while interviewing criminal justice populations (Campbell et al., 2009; Clark et al., 2017; Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012; Stella, Haguiha, & Sequeira, 2012; Zamani et al., 2010). Apart from having the interviewer her/himself take notes, another researcher was assigned to assist the former to transcribe the interview and to ensure verbatim recording among correctional healthcare providers (Clark et al., 2017). This is because note-taking, if it was done by the interviewer, was found to be distracting to the interviewee and thus was kept to a minimum (Patton, 2002).

However, even when audio-recordings were allowed, some researchers have pointed out how transcriptions from audio-recordings may be inaccurate. Poland (1995) posits that verbatim transcription from audio-recordings in itself was inaccurate. This was because the transcriber was noting only what could be heard and could not take into consideration other elements that were not be audio-recorded, thereby possibly losing the meaning of the expressions and gestures. Therefore, writing detailed field notes was important even with audio-recording. In another case, the audio-recording was inaudible in some parts and the field notes written by the interviewer were used to provide a better understanding of the interviewee's responses (Roberson, White, & Fogel, 2009). Field notes "helped to place the interviews in the context of their surroundings and allowed the interviewer to record new issues to be explored in future" (Long, Allwright, & Begley, 2004, p. 140).

In sum, the reasons for non-use of electronic recording devices could stem from the decision of the authorities, the interviewees, or the researchers/interviewers themselves. We next discuss the practical and theoretical foundations that underpin the practical guide we have developed.

Practical and Theoretical Foundations

Practical Foundation

This paper emerged from our experiences conducting in-depth interviews in situations where we were not able or allowed to make any recordings of the interviews on audio or video. In our search for a tested or prescribed method for conducting interviews without any electronic recording devices, we found that no comprehensive one exists. But having had to face this constraint over and over again in the course of our work, we decided to document the procedures that we have devised to share our knowledge with the scientific community. We have also been using it in formal and informal training modules to prepare our undergraduate and graduate assistants who were involved in conducting the said interviews.

We draw information from books and reports, and informal feedback from interviewees, researchers and our own research assistants in developing this guide. The guidance that we have developed is for general use in in-depth interviews, or as a basis for developing an interview protocol to suit the researchers' situational and contextual needs. While there are numerous insightful reports discussing strategies and approaches for in-depth

interviews the area of criminal justice research (e.g., Childs & Walsh, 2017; Marcus, Sanson, Horning, Thompson, & Curtis, 2016; Owens, Rowell, & Moyers, 2017), the development of this guide needs to take into consideration the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research designs through which such data are collected using in-depth interviews.

Theoretical Foundation

We adopted the elements in Roller and Lavrakas's (2015) *total quality framework* (TQF) in developing our guidelines as it is necessary to draw from existing principles of quality in the process of developing a protocol to cross-check for consistency. They propose four components, namely *credibility*, *analyzability*, *transparency* and as a result, *usefulness*. Although the components cannot be completely applicable for all qualitative studies, they could still be used as tools to evaluate the validity, usefulness, (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) strengths and limitations of qualitative studies (Boros, 2018).

1. Credibility

The first element of TQF is credibility (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). In qualitative research, credibility could be developed through validation (Davidov & Eisikovits, 2015). This can be achieved by describing process instead of presenting the findings from which readers could use to form their own judgements and choose if they would accept the meanings constructed (Patton, 2002). The process of developing this guide was carried out in two stages. First, we established the guidelines using our own experiences and past studies. We began by outlining the stages in the interview process, then brainstormed and discussed what needs to be achieved in each stage. From our own experiences, the first author outlined how to address the challenges faced in formal and informal interviews where electronic recording devices are not available for use. She is a freelance journalist turned researcher who has experience conducting journalistic interviews for over 15 years where even a pen and reporter's notebook were considered threatening by some interviewees. As a researcher, she has conducted research interviews for 12 years, and taught interview techniques in graduate courses for eight years. She has encountered and overcome many situations in which journalistic and qualitative interviews had to be done without using electronic audio-recorders. The second author has been doing interviews among criminal justice populations in the United States, India, and Malaysia throughout his 30-year career in academic criminal justice. His extensive exposure and experiences conducting interviews with a variety of people drawn from criminal justice populations in a variety of locations such as prisons and police facilities in three countries enabled him to contribute ideas constructively in the creation of the protocol. He is knowledgeable about how to manage and overcome the challenges concerning interviews with criminal justice populations. The third author is a licensed counsellor in Malaysia who has been practicing since 2010 and worked as a legal officer for three years. She has taught counselling techniques including interviewing techniques for eight years and conducted research in field of criminal justice for the past six years. Her formal training and education in interview techniques in counselling has helped us incorporate them into the guide.

In the second stage, after developing the protocol, it was tested in our fieldwork from 2015 to 2017 by the researchers, graduate, and undergraduate research assistants on our teams. In the course of three years, a total of nine trained interviewers comprising researchers and research assistants have used this protocol to interview almost 100 participants. After each fieldwork episode, we solicited feedback and suggestions from the interviewers, then reviewed, fine-tuned and improved the guidelines. Thirdly, publishing and documenting our suggested protocol in this journal is another way of enhancing its credibility.

2. Analyzability

The analyzability (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) of the guide was checked in two ways. First, the guide provides meaningful and well-defined stages enabling researchers to analyze the interview process. These stages allow researchers to adapt the protocol to suit the research design, and context and complexities of the interview during fieldwork. Secondly, after each interview, the interviewers could reflect, examine, and critique the suitability and utility of each step. The guide could also be analyzed examining interviewer feedback, and quality of fieldnotes or completed interview forms.

3. Transparency

To ensure transparency (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) we focused on two elements—process and content. First, the guide structures the interview process enabling researchers to describe and demonstrate each step to allow interviewers to be more aware of the purpose and desired results of each stage. In the training of our interviewers and students, we described and explained the purpose of each stage and then demonstrated the process to them. This enhanced the transparency of the module and standardized the procedures. Second, transparency of interview content in reporting needs to be ensured (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). One way was to ask the interviewee to verify important phrases and jot them down verbatim. We then repeat the written quote to the participant for verification to ensure that we recorded the expressions verbatim. Also, we suggest having two interviewers conduct each interview to help take notes, co-construct the meaning and observe non-verbal cues.

4. Usefulness

Usefulness (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) was our initial motive for developing this protocol, corresponding with the practical foundation. First, this is a functional guide that is effective and convenient to ensure that our efforts were coordinated, structured and standardized during fieldwork. Second, it was also useful in training our research assistants in preparation for fieldwork. It provided our teams with a systematic guide and standardized our procedures. Third, the step-by-step guide was useful for the delivery of our courses on research methods for graduate students. Although some graduate students do not have any field experience, it was important to expose and better prepare them for the challenges and constraints that they may face.

The usefulness element depends not only on how the protocol provides value to its developers and team members. Roller and Lavrakas (2015, p. 45) posit that assessing the degree of usefulness of a study requires the researcher to think about the knowledge gap that it could fill, provide value to other researchers and offer "new or refined methods of gathering qualitative data." This protocol fills a significant knowledge gap as few studies in the past discuss the procedures that researchers have resorted to when the electronic recording devices were not used for a variety of reasons.

The guidelines that follow are the result of synthesizing various situations and responses to the "no audio-recording" problem identified in the earlier literature review that are then subjected to the requirements imposed by the TQF.

A Guide for Interviews Without Recording Devices

Table 1. Guidelines and steps for interviews without electronic recording devices

Steps	Tasks
1	Preparing an interview form
2	Deciding on having one or two interviewers per interviewee
3	Initial introduction
4	Ethical procedures
5	Interview
6	Ending the interview
7	Completing and expanding the transcript
8	Writing field notes with reflections

Table 1 lists the guidelines and suggested step-by-step protocol for the conduct of interviews without using electronic recording devices. Each step is explained below.

1. Preparing an interview form

In preparation for the in-depth interview, an *interview form* is designed. The interview form contains the information that the interviewer needs to gather, including demographic questions. The interview form is designed to facilitate note-taking, unlike an interview or topic guide that is used to solicit responses that are audio recorded. It provides spaces for the interviewer to take notes, avoiding the need to write anything that could be pre-written such as questions, or topics. A blank space is provided after each question for the interviewer to write extensive notes and verbatim responses that correspond with the question or topics. Therefore, it is important that the interviewers to be completely familiar with the interview form and content along with research assistants and those not directly involved in the project.

2. Deciding on having one or two interviewers per interviewee

It is typical to have one interviewer to one participant in conducting in-depth interviews, especially when audio-recording devices are being used. However, we propose having two interviewers conduct the face-to-face interview. The idea for using two interviewers came about initially as we had to ensure that the assistants did not miss out on important facts that the participants say in response to the interview questions. This procedure was also a safety net as the interviewers felt that their partners had their backs if they missed out on anything explicit or implicit during the interview such as tone of voice, eye contact, and other non-verbal gestures that could affect the quality of their interpretations.

This procedure proved to be very useful because it was important for the interviewers to record the responses from the participants accurately the first time. For example, conducting interviews with prisoners, police officers, and police volunteers or reservists was very challenging in terms of access and duration. Often, follow-up interviews were not possible because of a variety of reasons such as access, relocations or transfers of the participants to another facility or location, or in the case of prisoners, release. Thus, it is even more important for interviewers to ensure that the record of responses is accurate and verified in the first and, possibly the only, interview they will ever get with that interviewee.

The main interviewer is responsible for taking the lead in conducting the interview, asking the questions, and taking brief notes regarding responses. The main interviewer should maintain eye contact with the interviewee and not be distracted with the notes. However, the

second should not only be a "note-taker" but play a more active role (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) as an observer and active listener. Therefore, the assistant interviewer should be able to take more extensive notes as he or she does not have the responsibility of asking questions. This format of using two interviewers is not uncommon as it has been seen in some studies (e.g., Clark et al., 2017; Yang, Mamy, Gao, & Xiao, 2015). In fact, it was found that multiple interviewers are typical and necessary for research in the area of sexual violence (Campbell et al., 2009). However, in our experience, we have made the decision to have only one interviewer conduct the interview when it was not possible, convenient, or effective to have two. Thus, the decision on having one or two interviewers would be up to the researchers and the interviewers themselves.

3. Initial introduction

Verbal introduction

The interviewer initiates the conversation with the participant by introducing one or both interviewers to the participant as the main interviewer (and assistant interviewer). This process usually includes providing the name of the interviewer(s). In the cases where there are two interviewers, the main interviewer briefly explains that his/her main role would be to ask questions and that the assistant interviewer's role would be mainly to take notes.

Non-verbal gestures

Depending on the culture and context, the interviewer(s) could make eye contact and shake hands with the interviewee during the initial introduction to establish rapport and become "closer" to the interviewer(s) who will most likely be stranger(s) to the interviewee. The gesture indicates openness and allows the participant to begin developing trust and rapport with the interviewers. We found that this step was vital as it creates a good foundation and impression to encourage the respondents to open up and express themselves more freely. When respondents are comfortable with the interviewers, they are likely to be more willing to share their stories (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). This gesture also signals respect for the interviewee and communicates our acknowledgement of their presence. This is important when we interviewed research participants who do not get such acknowledgement such as prisoners. This was found to be true by Lafferty, Treloar, Chambers, Butler, and Guthrie (2016) who interviewed prisoners in Australia. Building such rapport and engaging the prisoners in the interviews indicated their "desire to be heard and be treated as humans." (Lafferty et al., 2016, p. 31). However, we only did this with permission from prison authorities and within prison guard supervision for safety and security reasons.

When there are two interviewers, it is important that both interviewers shake hands with the participant. This is to avoid having the interviewee feel distant from the assistant interviewer who will be quiet more often than the main interviewer. This gesture is important to establish the involvement of both interviewers in the interview process. In our experience, when this was not done, some participants had asked the main interviewer who the other person was. This indicates the participants' concern about the assistant interviewer being a third person. The assistant interviewer appeared to be more distant and hostile in the conversation given the assistant interviewer's role that is verbally less active compared to the main interviewer's part. Although some participants did not express this matter verbally, the assistant interviewer would appear to be even more distant and uninvolved if no formal introduction took place. The process of having both the main and assistant interviewers introduce themselves formally helped the participant feel at greater ease.

4. Ethical procedures

Next, the interviewer details the ethical procedures that the study will abide by. The interviewer introduces the participant to the study explaining the procedures and research objectives. The explanation of the research outcomes and process has been found to influence the satisfaction among victims of crime with their participation in qualitative studies (Richards & Cross, 2017). Time is given for the interviewee to think over, read and reread any documents, and to ask questions. This step allows for informed consent for the interview to be given or to be withdrawn.

5. The interviewer

Each interviewer prepares a copy of the individual interview form and pen in hand. After the assistant interviewer starts the timer (if applicable), the main interviewer proceeds with the first question from the list. Both interviewers will listen actively to the responses from the participants. They would both also make extensive and clear notes in their copy of the interview form.

The main interviewer maintains eye contact with the participant most of the time, with occasional breaks to make notes in the form. The assistant interviewer is focused on making notes most of the time, occasionally looking at the participant to make eye contact and to look out for non-verbal cues. The assistant interviewer asks questions to seek clarification or probe an issue.

To get quotable quotes for report writing, both interviewers could pause and take the time to write out verbatim response from the participant. They could prompt the participant for confirmation of a quote or to repeat the quote to the participant to ensure accuracy in reporting. Interviewers could also prompt the participant to get a more detailed quote or draw their attention to certain issues that emerge. However, this procedure must be done carefully so as not to interrupt the interviewee's train of thought or to distract him or her. We found that asking for clarification and taking time to write down direct quotes verbatim was important. Most of the time, the participants also show understanding and would pause to allow us to finish writing. In our experience, they would also sometimes clarify, add to or self-correct what they have expressed. Similarly, unclear responses could be revisited later if seeking clarification earlier would cause the interviewee to lose his/her train of thought.

6. Ending the interview

As the interview comes to an end, both interviewers verbally thank the participant. If the culture and context permit, both interviewers could again initiate a thank you handshake with the participant to signal the completion of the interview and closure.

7. Completing and expanding the transcript

After ending the interview, the interviewers review their own notes and fill in incomplete sections while memory of the discussion is still fresh. To avoid *collaborative inhibition* (Weldon & Bellinger, 1997), they each could write their notes individually so that each interviewer could recall and use their own methods to retrieve relevant information from their own memory. They may then choose to cross-check their notes on site or later, if they need to and help each other recall what was expressed.

8. Writing field notes with reflections

We combine writing field notes and reflective journaling in a single step although both these tasks require the interviewers to carry out slightly different activities. It is important that both these tasks be completed soon after, if not immediately after, the interview when memory and "reflections are fresh" (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). The importance of writing field notes cannot be overemphasized. Field notes that detail observations, interpretations and reflections can help create a "comprehensive interview transcript" (Roberson et al., 2009) and enhance the accuracy of the transcription (MacLean, Meyer, & Estable, 2004).

Interviewer(s) should take a few minutes to reflect on and write field notes after each interview at the interview site or, if that is not possible, at a more convenient place later. These reflections are important for interviewers to expand and interpret the information they have gathered. If each pair of interviewers had to conduct more than one interview per day or per session, they should be allotted time to complete field notes after each interview. If there are two interviewers, the field notes could be written by the interviewer alone, separately by both interviewers, or together. Interviewers reflect on the interaction with the respondent, record their observations and make notes on their interpretations of the data collected. We found these reflections especially useful in interpretive research analyses methods as it gave researchers a head-start on data analysis. This was also useful because interviewers could recall the details and nuances from the interview in an effort to report a "thick" description of what transpired. In fact, the field notes were richer and thicker compared to the interview notes/transcriptions by themselves.

The field notes with reflections from each interviewer helped us distinguish each participant as an individual case with his or her own unique narrative when we analyzed the interview notes. The field notes provided the needed "filling" and context to enable coders to make sense of the interview notes in the individual survey form. In the case of prisoner interviews, it was difficult and sometimes impossible for us to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants because of a lack of access and problems of timing. The participants could have been transferred to another prison, completed their sentence or released on parole. Therefore, it was vital that we document the interview and observations in detail.

Limitations of the Guide

Our guide is not exhaustive and has limitations. First, we do not claim these guidelines to be some kind of standard operating procedure to be adopted by all qualitative researchers in a situation when recording devices cannot be used. Our intention in documenting these procedures is to provide a reference or guide to other researchers and methods educators like us who have been in search of one when we faced this constraint. Interview situations may vary, with some more challenging than others. Thus, this procedure could serve as a guide or reference for researchers to develop their own interview protocol. Second, the procedures that we document here do not include the interview strategies or approaches; they only focus on the procedures to capture interviewee responses without using electronic recording devices. Third, our guidelines are designed specifically for face-to-face in-depth interviews. They are not meant for interviews using modalities such as communication or video-conferencing apps like Skype or Facetime or Google Hangouts, email, phone, and other tools where recording the interview is built into the modality or do not pose similar challenges.

Despite these limitations, the protocol that we have developed, justified and described above could be adapted for use in other research designs or to suit other researchers' needs, contexts, disciplines, and cultures. Research with criminal justice populations could notably take on a variety of situations for which researchers need to adapt to for example "inmate

freedom" (e.g., security levels, prison regimes, staff, locations, and country, among others). Whether adaptation or adoption, our protocol provides a reference to investigators in the field of criminal justice research and beyond.

Conclusion

This paper fills the knowledge gap in providing a clear, detailed and systematic guide for researchers to conduct and record respondent interviews that is lacking in past studies when electronic recording equipment is not used in criminal justice research. The methodological and practical implications of this guide are that it is adaptable to various fields beyond criminal justice studies. It can also be adapted for use in various research approaches, methods, and protocols involving in-depth face-to-face interviews. This flexibility also allows researchers to systemically overcome one of the many challenges, constraints, and complexities of research fieldwork. For us, this guide had proven to be useful at first, and then advantageous later when we used it over and over again in our research fieldwork, training modules, and research methodology courses.

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Author Note

Phaik Kin Cheah is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia. She received her Ph.D. at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her research interests are in the areas concerning police volunteer reserves, teacher education, and qualitative methods. She also serves as a volunteer police constable in Malaysia. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: cheahpk@utar.edu.my.

N. Prabha Unnithan is a professor of sociology at Colorado State University. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He served as the Editor of the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* (1999-2002) and *The Social Science Journal* (2006-2011). He is currently co-editor of the *Sociological Quarterly* and 1st Vice President of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. His research interests are in the areas of criminology, criminal justice, and policy analysis. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Prabha.Unnithan@colostate.edu.

Annie Margaret Sandela Raran is now a freelance researcher. She was formerly a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia. Her areas of interests are in counselling, prison research, and sexuality. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: anniesandra76@gmail.com.

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